

LYRIC IGNORANCE: TECHNOLOGIES OF AMERICAN POETRY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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January 2013

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Cornell University 2013

This study argues that the rhetoric of ignorance has helped to define the lyric genre in US poetry and its criticism. It examines how differentiations between poetic thought and knowledge have informed recent responses to Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Frank O'Hara—altering both their reputations as lyric poets and the material histories of their texts. Whereas new media scholars often link technology with rationality and information, “Lyric Ignorance” challenges critiques of the lyric by showing how textual equipment enables lyrical claims against knowledge. It thereby explores how the language of ignorance has informed the social and historical values of US lyric poetry in the postwar and contemporary periods.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Seth Michael Perlow was raised in Atlanta, GA and attended college at Brown University, where he concentrated in Comparative Literature, earning an AB (2005) with Highest Honors and departmental honors. His undergraduate thesis, a translation of work by the Argentine poet Karina Macció, won the Rosalie Colie Prize in Comparative Literature. He then enrolled in the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, earning an MA in Humanities (2006). A revision of his master's thesis on Wallace Stevens' early poetry, "The Other *Harmonium*: Toward a Minor Stevens," appeared in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 33.2 (Fall 2009). After working for several months as a copy editor in New York City, he moved to Paris and enrolled in the *Cours de la Langue et Civilisation Française*, la Sorbonne (Paris IV). In fall 2007 he returned to the United States and began the doctoral program in English at Cornell University. His poetry, scholarship, and literary translations have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies.

To my family,

David, Joan, and Dara Perlow, Marjorie Stevens, and Caetlin Benson-Allott

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first gratitude is to my parents, David and Joan Perlow, for instilling in me a love of ideas and a perseverance without which I could not have completed this work. Their tireless encouragement and faith in my abilities has provided a sustenance beyond thanks or accounting.

This project owes its strengths to my special committee and its weaknesses to me. Jonathan Culler, my committee chair, has provided incredibly generous and helpful guidance at every stage of this study's development; his responses and suggestions have been both meticulously attentive and imbued with the intellectual poise and perspective for which he is known. I am grateful to Roger Gilbert for asking questions whose generosity could be measured by their difficulty. I hope that my efforts to answer them have made this dissertation more robust and responsible. His knowledge of the history of American poetry is truly encyclopedic, and without it the project would not have developed as it has. Amy Villarejo, perhaps the most talented seminar leader I know, has been a valuable guide not only in the shaping of technology's place in this study but also in my own development as a new media scholar. She has helped me to keep in touch with the pleasures of poetry and of critical writing. Finally, although Christopher Nealon has sometimes referred to himself as my "outside" committee member, he has often provided the sense of an insider audience that helps a dissertation find its voice. His keen eye for what matters in contemporary poetry and scholarship has nurtured both this project and my self-conception as a critic. Together the members of my committee have contributed a great deal to the development of this project and this scholar. I owe them individually and collectively a deep gratitude.

I am also indebted to a number of individuals and groups, at Cornell and beyond, who have contributed in less formal ways to the development of this study. The members of my doctoral cohort in the Department of English at Cornell have made a convivial, mutually supportive, and intellectually lively community of which I am proud to be a member. I am especially grateful to the members of the Theory Reading Group at Cornell, for a few important friendships and for innumerable important conversations. Several professors at Cornell and elsewhere have provided feedback and helpful conversations about my dissertation work; for this kind of support I owe thanks to Amanda Anderson, Kevin Attell, Susan Buck-Morss, Timothy Murray, Martha Nell Smith, Masha Raskolnikov, Nick Salvato, and surely to others. I am also grateful to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell; the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory; and the Emily Dickinson International Society, which provided grants in support of this research.

Last but certainly not least, I want to thank two creatures whose contributions to this dissertation have reached well beyond the bounds of intellectual life and scholarship. Caetlin Benson-Allott, my partner in life and in thinking about life, has helped me and this project through the difficult moments that anyone writing a dissertation must face. Every day I am amazed and delighted by her patience, care, and generosity; I am grateful and proud to think that the mark of her intellect is visible throughout this study. I thank her for the support and companionship—personal, professional, intellectual—that she has provided during my time as a doctoral student. And finally, my cat Baker, who has remained blissfully ignorant of this entire undertaking and even of these Acknowledgements, must be thanked for reminding me that sometimes the most prudent course of action is to slow down a bit, stretch, and curl up for a nap.

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Introduction. Weak Ignorance and the Afterlives of the Lyric

*may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secrets of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old*

–E.E. Cummings
“53,” (1954)

*You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.*

–Wallace Stevens
“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1947)

Cummings and Stevens offer these lyrical prescriptions at a transitional moment in the development of American poetry, but the links they draw between poetry and ignorance are far from new. Indeed, since antiquity people have affiliated poetry with modes of thought that are distinguished from knowledge. This view goes back at least to Plato, whose attacks on imitative poetry in *Ion* and *Republic* assign a dangerous ignorance to the poet.¹ Poets in the modern era, for their part, have often celebrated this linkage between poetry and not-knowing. At least since Thomas Gray’s famous 1742 declaration that “where ignorance is bliss / ’Tis folly to be wise,” poetic discourse has offered a way to revalue ignorance as something other than the stubborn scourge of rational knowing (99-100). The romantic poets may have shared little with Gray, but in solidifying the coordinates of the modern lyric genre they made an axiom of his judgment on ignorance.² Since then, lyric poetry has been strongly affiliated with modes of thought whose

¹ “A poetic imitator uses words...to paint colored pictures of each of the crafts. He himself knows nothing about them, but...others, as ignorant as he, who judge by words, will think he speaks extremely well” (*Republic* X.601.a).

² In “Intimations of Immortality” and elsewhere, Wordsworth continues Gray’s affiliation of a nostalgically valued ignorance with a return to childhood: “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting... / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy, / But he beholds the light, and whence it flows ... / At length the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day” (59-77). This affiliation of lyric poetry with an impossible return

distinctness from knowledge makes them attractive, and with increasing intensity the habitual marking of this difference from knowledge has helped to define the lyric genre per se. “Lyric Ignorance” examines how a set of relatively recent technical and aesthetic developments has altered this longstanding affiliation between lyric poetry and not-knowing. The amplification of uncertainties about the lyric genre and its future has made newly visible the lyric’s longstanding ties to ignorance and, simultaneously, has magnified the importance of claims against knowledge in current approaches to the lyric.

These recent changes make it possible to describe the rhetorical function of what I call “weak ignorance” as it has shaped ideas about lyric poetry. Many theories of ignorance view it as an absolute, irrecoverable other of knowledge. Weak ignorance, by contrast, refers to claims against knowledge that nonetheless involve themselves actively in epistemic systems, often sustaining alternative forms of certainty. For example, when a courtroom witness responds to every question with “I do not recall” or “I do not know,” his studied avowal of ignorance may support the jury’s suspicions that he has something to hide; here the rhetoric of not-knowing in fact sustains an adjoint way to know. Such ignorance is weak by virtue of its fungibility and flexibility, its availability as a collaborative other of knowledge. Weak ignorance functions rhetorically when the logic or grammar of a statement against knowledge is overridden by the statement’s rhetorical power to persuade or assure. However, such rhetoric is not a mere trick of slippery phrases; it organizes our attitudes about whole categories of cognition.³ Consider the cognitive mode of affect or emotion. In a heated argument, I might admit I cannot prove my point but still avow certainty because “I can just *feel* I’m right.” Appeals to emotional conviction

to childlike naiveté would reach American shores largely intact, as in Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “A child said, What is the grass?... / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he” (91-92).

³ Andrew Bennett’s *Ignorance* (2009) ably traces the romantic sublime and other modes of ignorance in the lyricism of Wordsworth and Keats. However, it reads ignorance as marking literature’s “divorce from cognition” and does not recognize the possibility of thinking without knowing, the domain of ignorance traced here (37).

are compelling because no one can refute my feelings or provide evidence against them. Feeling is a privileged cognitive register because of its distinctness from rational thought, its immunity to skeptical interrogation. Yet this rhetorical distinction between affection and rational knowing ultimately authorizes affection as a basis for claims of certainty, an authority that obtains for any affective impression, whatever its predicate. Diverse ways of thinking qualify as weak ignorance because their sheer *distinctness from knowledge* sustains their interest.

This distinctness from knowledge lends some coherence to the idea of ignorance. There is a nuanced vocabulary for differentiating types of knowledge, but it remains perplexingly easy to conflate ignorance with various related concepts.⁴ This study conceives of ignorance quite broadly, counting any mode of thought that is rhetorically opposed to knowledge, but it rarely divagates from “ignorance” as its key term. Some alternative terms, such as unknowing and nonknowledge, already have specific philosophical meanings, and these often reference an escapist, mystical desire not evident in lyric ignorance.⁵ Other concepts related to not-knowing—such as uncertainty, doubt, naiveté, blindness, confusion, perplexity, aporia, misinformation, and obliviousness—are generally avoided for two reasons. First, the privilege of “ignorance” unifies a variety of literary practices that privilege a mode of thought primarily by virtue of its distinctness from knowledge, regardless of its particulars.⁶ Second, “ignorance” is an unusually live word; its strong connotations underscore weak ignorance’s salience for the discourses of

⁴ Andrew Bennett uses ignorance and nescience interchangeably (81-99) and does not mark its difference from “perplexity or aporia” (15), nor from “bafflement, conceptual blankness, uncertainty” (34). Though often to more productive ends, Avital Ronell’s *Stupidity* (2002) conflates ignorance with stupidity and idiocy—a particularly conspicuous slippage between dispositional and epistemic terms.

⁵ In Philip Weinstein’s work and elsewhere, “unknowing” connotes a Levinasian metaphysics, and “nonknowledge” echoes Bataille’s *non-savoir*, another absolutist treatment of knowledge’s other.

⁶ The most productive discussions of “ignorance” in critical theory appear in the work of Paul de Man and his respondents. Although I have limited occasion to cite de Man in “Lyric Ignorance,” I am indebted to his work throughout; in particular, his concept of rhetoric enables my own account of what it means to claim ignorance. The most substantial commentaries on de Man’s theory of ignorance appear in Ronell’s *Stupidity* and in Rodolphe Gasché’s *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* (1998).

value that “Lyric Ignorance” tracks. Because a difference from knowledge can occasion either praise or disparagement, the rhetoric of weak ignorance supports a wide array of value-claims across the political, aesthetic, and ethical spectrums. Indeed, such flexibility makes weak ignorance a potent means of attributing value, and the baleful connotations of “ignorance” help to foreground this function.

Fungible claims against knowledge are familiar to western philosophy and critical theory. The productive powers of avowing ignorance are perhaps best known from René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, though this move is repeated in a variety of critical projects in the Cartesian tradition. The inaugural decision of Descartes’ philosophy is not the assertion of the *cogito* out of the blue but a willful claim of ignorance: “I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences” (45).⁷ The philosophy of Descartes, in many ways the template for modern critique, thus begins by abrogating all supposed knowledge, in the interest of starting more surely from scratch. This abrogation is rhetorical and not logical because the linguistic conventions, figural conceits, and methodological commitments that sustain Descartes’ discourse necessarily remain intact. For him the poetic operations of word and figure appear prior to rational knowing. Among others, Edmund Husserl replicates the Cartesian strategy through the phenomenological epoché: “I have thereby chosen to begin in absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of knowledge” (*Cartesian 2*). His claim of ignorance is weak, rather than “absolute,” since it remains crucially open to renegotiation in the service of knowledge.

⁷ Descartes makes clear in the prefatory summary of the *Meditations* that his is a metaphysical rather than a phenomenological mode of critique: “But although the utility of a Doubt which is so general does not at first appear, it is at the same time very great, inasmuch as it delivers us from every kind of prejudice, and sets out for us a very simple way by which the mind may detach itself from the senses” (41).

Already these philosophers' opening claims against knowledge involve a poetic impulse. Descartes deploys an architectonic metaphor to position ignorance as the only sure foundation for the house of knowledge, and Husserl likens the disavowal of knowledge to a vow of "poverty." Poets too describe how claims of ignorance enable the sensorial receptiveness Descartes and Husserl are after. A.R. Ammons begins "Gravelly Run" by averring, "I don't know somehow it seems sufficient / to see and hear whatever coming and going is" (1-2). The ignorant but perceptive stance lyrically stills time and transforms knowledge: "for it is not so much to know the self / as to know it as it is known / ... as if birth had never found it / and death could never end it" (7-8, 10-11). Eve Sedgwick, by turn, refers to fiction as she describes the literary function of ignorance and explores its power to make an epistemic difference. She notes that different forms of ignorance "are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth" ("Privilege" 25). Through this "doubletting with knowledges," weak ignorances appear not as "pieces of the originary dark" but as terms in exchange with knowledge. "Lyric Ignorance" argues that such rhetoric of not-knowing has played a central role in the development of the lyric genre. Much like the subject of Cartesian philosophy, the expressive "I" of lyrical writing sets out from a position of ignorance—an ignorance that grounds the resulting discourse and whose possible recoveries the lyric poem might trace.

Neither every lyric poem nor every critical philosophy views ignorance as weak and rhetorically flexible. When philosophers see ignorance in more absolute terms, however, it can be approached only asymptotically; it appears in relation to knowledge as a threatening abyss. Such topoi may help to describe knowledge's limits, but absolute ignorance stands for that about which we cannot speak, soliciting a deep silence and barring any rhetorical or poetic account of

claims against knowledge.⁸ For literary criticism, the most salient absolutist theories of ignorance are the negative theologies developed in the wake of Levinasian phenomenology, especially the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. Exponents of the “ethical turn” in criticism often follow Levinas and his acolytes in describing ethical responsibility as a relation with an other whose subjective space is radically unknowable, so the ethical encounter unfolds through absolute, irrecoverable ignorance in relation to the other. Much remains to be contested in such accounts; these more or less explicitly theological appeals to infinitude often entail a rightist exclusion of plurality and pragmatic politics. This study expands the phenomenological discourse of ignorance to include the weaker, more flexible claims against knowledge that have predominated in lyrical writing, if not in the philosophy of ignorance itself. Examining the everyday rhetoric of not-knowing enables a more detailed analysis of the social, political, and ethical effects of ignorance, in place of the aspirational metaphysics of absolutist theories.⁹

Many poems take similarly absolutist approaches to ignorance, and if this casts their philosophic outlooks into doubt, it does nothing to diminish their quality as poems. Much like the philosophy of the same perspective, the poetry of irrecoverable ignorance often refers to some idea of the divine. In “The Rhodora,” for instance, Emerson responds to a question about the flower’s origin by addressing the flower itself: “I never knew: / But, in my simple ignorance, suppose / The self-same Power that brought me there brought you” (14-16). Emerson’s ignorance differs from weak ignorance because no rhetoric transforms it into a positive basis of knowledge. He makes suppositions despite, not through, his ignorance. Theological evasions of

⁸ Absolutist philosophies of ignorance may begin with the discourse of Platonic forms, but in the modern period they stem most directly from the German idealist theories of transcendental objects—the Kantian sublime, for example. Despite twentieth-century resistance to transcendentalism, ignorance has largely maintained its absolute cast, for instance in Bataille’s “nonknowledge [*non-savoir*]” and in theories of lack in post-Freudian psychoanalysis.

⁹ Existing literary-critical studies of ignorance generally prefer absolutist readings. Stanley Cavell’s *Disowning Knowledge* (1987) provides a primarily psychoanalytic account, and Philip Weinstein’s *Unknowing* (2005) prefers a Levinasian approach.

ignorance appear also in more recent American poetry. Consider the closing of Anne Sexton's "The Poet of Ignorance," in which the poet returns to the image of a crab clawing at her heart: "I had a dream once, / perhaps it was a dream, / that the crab was my ignorance of God. / But who am I to believe in dreams?" (35-38) Here ignorance provides a more direct avenue of divine contact, but as with Emerson such gnostic insight does not involve the conversion of ignorance into knowledge. Uncertainty lingers, instead of transforming into conviction, and the divine absolute is matched measure-for-measure by a concept of ignorance as itself absolute, irrecoverable. "Lyric Ignorance" focuses on poems that involve weaker ideas of ignorance—not because these are better poems but, as this study will show, because the idea of ignorance in rhetorical exchange with knowledge has done much to shape the lyric genre in the postwar and contemporary periods. Despite their strengths, poems like Emerson's and Sexton's, which take absolutist approaches to ignorance, have less to teach us about the lyric *per se* than do the poems of weak ignorance discussed below.

The rhetoric of weak ignorance appears in a wide variety of poems from the middle of last century. In the first of my epigraphs, E.E. Cummings appeals to his Muse for inspiration: "may my heart always be open to little / birds." He offers a negative judgment of knowledge, saying of these birds that "whatever they sing is better than to know." Nevertheless, when he claims that the birds "are the secrets of living," Cummings indicates that they provide an alternative avenue to knowledge, a means of recuperating ignorance itself. To hear inspiring melody is "better than to know," yet is itself a kind of insight—a way of learning "the secrets." Not to hear the birds is "to know" too much and to "have grown old." With this last phrase Cummings reproduces the romantic affiliation between poetic inspiration and childlike naiveté, the inspiration of seeing the world as though for the first time. The same romantic idea of a

return to childlike ignorance shapes the rhetoric of not-knowing in the second epigraph, from Wallace Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Here the poet addresses an ephebe who seeks advice on poetic composition, and Stevens describes the return to original ignorance as a path to poetic vision.¹⁰ Yet here too, the injunction to "become...ignorant...again" ultimately promises not a permanent escape from all knowledge but a way to "see...clearly" by seeing "with an ignorant eye." In place of Cummings' birdsong, Stevens organizes the dialectic of knowledge and ignorance around vision, and the promise of seeing the sun clearly, rather than becoming blinded by its overabundance of light, indexes Stevens' resistance to a negative theology that would locate divine inspiration in an overpowering, irrecoverable ignorance. For Stevens too, the poet's assumed ignorance is weaker than that, more available to sustain claims of knowledge. By offering both epigraphs, I want to indicate that despite the vast differences between Cummings and Stevens, they share a largely unrecognized commitment to the rhetoric of ignorance as an indicator of poetic inspiration, a belief that ignorance enables lyric thought. Both of these poets and many others continue to draw ideas about poetic ignorance from the romantic texts that solidified the modern lyric genre, but "Lyric Ignorance" does not primarily trace this exchange between nineteenth- and twentieth-century enactments of lyric ignorance. Rather, this study demonstrates that beginning in the period from which my epigraphs are taken—the middle of the twentieth century—a series of historical developments made the function of lyric ignorance more discernible and increased its power to shape the ongoing development of ideas about the lyric genre.

I refer to this period from the mid-twentieth century to the present as the era of lyric poetry's "afterlives." With increasing frequency during this period, poets and critics have

¹⁰ Ronell traces the lyricism of childlike ignorance to the ancient Greek concept of *nēpios* (40).

approached the lyric as inherently belated, lapsed, or outmoded. Yet quintessentially lyrical ideas such as subjective interiority, earnest expression, and formal unity remain important stakes in poetry cultures—whether as objects of disavowal or recovery. Plenty of poets continue to write lyric poems, often to great effect, but the specific matter of the lyric's belatedness, the sense of its having begun an afterlife, powerfully organizes both the experimentalist's claim that the genre's time has passed and the traditionalist's efforts to reclaim and renovate it. Hardly anyone can see the lyric as simply a living genre; either it is dead or it lives-on. Even if experimental poets in the past half-century have explored compelling alternatives to lyrical writing, the lyric has nevertheless continued to structure and inform many of these efforts, as it has become an increasingly reified object of disavowal. To write anti-lyrical poetry often means to further solidify the concept of the lyric and to acknowledge its continuing influence upon generic expectations for poetry. This is the sign of the lyric's afterlives: the genre is dead, and it cannot be killed.

Some critics have recently argued that privileging the lyric over other poetic genres effaces the considerable historical variability among and within genres, so that finer attention to the development of poetic types like the ode, the hymn, and the ballad will provide a richer image of literary history. Further, such critiques have argued that this historical effacement plays a central role in the constitution of the lyric per se. Under this reading, lyric poems seek to elevate a single moment and universalize it as an ahistorical space of pure expressivity, eliding the materially and historically variable contexts from which those poems now considered lyrics actually emerged.¹¹ The discourse of generic categories, however, is not only typological but also

¹¹ On the lyric and historicity, see Mark Jeffreys, ed., *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture* (1998) and Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), especially her reading of Sharon Cameron's *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1981). Relevant recent commentary appears in

normative. Poets invariably write in relation to the generic categories within which they anticipate their work will be positioned—even if only by considering that a poem is (or is not) the kind of thing they are producing. Even if a critic were to contest whether a lyric poem ever properly existed, no one can deny that so many poets have positioned their own work in relation to some preexisting idea of the lyric. In response to the historiological impulse to pluralize and specify poetry's inevitable variance from received generic norms, "Lyric Ignorance" instead reads the futuristic ramifications of a genre in the period of its afterlives, asking how the developing reputations of a few important poets shaped recent ideas about the lyric. The rhetoric of ignorance has become more visibly and intensively linked with the fate of the lyric in this period of the genre's afterlives, and this study traces the changes that have made ignorance an especially important stake in recent thinking about the genre.

As existing studies attest, the rhetoric of ignorance has shaped a wide array of aesthetic practices and intellectual pursuits, but focusing on its contribution to the lyric genre opens an especially salient series of questions for literary criticism. The post-classical discourse of ignorance begins with religious thought such as the neoplatonic work of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, the anonymous poem *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Nicolas of Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*. Although lyric ignorance surely owes something to these works, the modern lyric genre has become overinvested with a remarkable number of meanings that lend it a special interest. Theorists have affiliated the lyric with the idea of intimate self-expression, with formal wholeness or autonomy, with a-temporal or a-historical stillness, and with the visual and aural physicality of language—commitments this study frequently addresses in the analysis of weak ignorance. Moreover, the lyric often epitomizes a general concept of literary refinement. As

the collection of short essays about "The New Lyric Studies," *PMLA* 123.1 (Jan. 2008), especially contributions by Virginia Jackson, Rei Terada, Jonathan Culler, and Yopie Prins.

Northrop Frye puts it, the lyric is “the genre which most clearly shows the hypothetical core of literature” (271). The function of ignorance in lyric poetry, therefore, might exemplify a broader relation between literature and not-knowing. There are plenty of ignorance strategies that have nothing to do with the lyric genre, but the latter’s capacity to signify such a range of key principles for current discussions of literature and criticism makes it the ideal field in which to unfold the effects of weak ignorance.

* * *

Among other factors, an array of technological developments since the middle of last century has energized the rhetoric of lyric ignorance. The astonishingly pervasive deployment of electronic computers and telecommunications networks has profoundly altered our relation to written and spoken language, our approaches to the composition and consumption of literature, and our most basic ideas about what it means to be social. This study frequently emphasizes the links among these terms in order not only to show how poetry is conditioned by the techno-social contexts from which it emerges, but also to argue that lyric poems make particularly inventive use of technology to produce compelling ideas about our social worlds. However, it is easy to mischaracterize the relation between technological development and aesthetic production. A brief discussion of three common mistakes in this area will clarify the status of technology in “Lyric Ignorance.”

First, the proliferation of computers does not mean we now have “more” technology or that life has become more intensively technical. My machines are vastly more complex than those used in an eighteenth-century textile mill, for example, but the physical techniques they demand do not discipline my body and behavior as strictly. Of course, countless factory workers continue to endure injury as a result of the technologies they encounter at work, but the point is

that technology's degree of advancement and proliferation does not necessarily intensify its effects upon lived experience. Indeed, to believe otherwise is to suppose that we can even say what does and does not count as technology. When my knee aches, I think of it as a technology for movement, and I may rethink my walking technique, my gait. Perhaps my knee does not qualify as technology because no human designed it, but surely if I use a stick as a cane, this counts as a technology although I did not design the stick. Such basic examples embarrass current tendencies to equate technology with computers and to assume we now have more of it than our ancestors did. Even if machines have become more complex and prevalent, this does not necessarily mean that technology's effects upon lived experience have become more keenly felt.

Just as we ignore the knee until it aches, technologies are differentially available to critical attention, variably visible qua technology. At times, the material bases for reading and writing appear as instruments to use in rationally intended ways, but at other times such materials have functional effects while receiving only the most obscure, indirect forms of attention—while remaining objects of ignorance. I mark this difference through the Heideggerian distinction between equipment [*Zeug*] and technology [*technologie*]. Equipment for Heidegger indicates “that which one has to do with in one's concernful dealings” (*Being* 96). As a tool “in-order-to,” it tends to disappear from attention as it becomes lost in the complex of intentional action (97).¹² As I type this sentence, for instance, my desk and the floor supporting it and the truck that brought the desk here and the electricity powering my lamp—all these, subsumed into the process of writing, recede from my attention as they become contiguous with an indefinitely extensive world of equipment, a world of materials “in-order-to” that shape and constrain what I do and know, but without my critical awareness. Technology for Heidegger, on the other hand, is

¹² Heidegger affiliates “equipment” with the Greek *pragmata*. The more common Heideggerian term for this uncritical aspect of instruments is the “ready-to-hand,” but *Zeug* can also mean “stuff” in the collective and sometimes pejorative sense. “Taken strictly, there ‘is’ no such thing as *an* equipment” (*Being* 97).

“no mere means” to an end, not a mere tool that gets subsumed toward a purpose (“Question” 318). Rather, “techné belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic.” Technology refers to the appearance of a technicity that sustains any appearance. If equipment signifies the function of tools while we remain ignorant of their action, then technology indicates the recuperation of this ignorance, an awareness of the materials and techniques by which *poiēsis* takes place. By examining the materials of poetic composition and reading, “Lyric Ignorance” not only traces how such equipment sustains the rhetoric of lyric ignorance, but also analyzes the technological supports of such rhetoric—thereby offering some insight into the broader epistemic effects of technology in poetry cultures and beyond.

The second error would be to believe that technology strongly determines the situation of poetry or the development of poetic genres. Technological history might describe the material backings of a certain verse culture or an individual poet, but it cannot adequately account for the production of any single poem. Given technology’s variable availability to critical attention, positing a necessary effect for a certain technology might unduly focalize a range of technological effects and possibilities, many of which remain unthought. My concern with poetic genres further complicates the attempt to read poems in relation to technological history, since the question of genre solicits readings of a poem’s futurity, not only its historical contexts. When a poet writes in a given genre, she has no historically reliable way of knowing what earlier poets thought about that genre at the time of their writing; rather, she writes in relation to preexisting poems of the genre as their reputations have developed up to the present—that is, in relation to the current historical image of a given genre, not its historical actuality.¹³ “Lyric Ignorance”

¹³ Marjorie Perloff complains that “critics continue to assume the presence of romantic continuities, as when Helen Vendler compares Jorie Graham to Keats or Harold Bloom speaks of A.R. Ammons as a Wordsworthian poet” (“Response” 251). Although Perloff may be right that no authentically romantic lyricism is possible any longer, all

therefore responds to the determinist impulse of technological historiography, indeed to the necessitarian impulse of historical thinking in general, by asking about the generic and technological *futures* of poems.

The idea of genre entails a deep ambivalence about the historicity of literary works. On one hand, a genre is constituted by the historical reiteration of certain norms, the traits shared among temporally dispersed works. Yet a genre finds unity in the regularity and invariability of its instances, so its very coherence as a literary type rests on the elision of historical differences among its specific members. Such generic attributions displace and transform a text's historical relations, rather than denying its historicity altogether. Indeed, as I argue throughout this study, assigning a text to a generic category often involves the text in a discourse of value specific to that genre, and this generically delimited discourse of value may indeed operate historically. For example, consider the attributions of value that Hart Seely made possible when he "found" the following poem, "The Unknown," in then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's comments at a 2002 press briefing:

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know. (Seely)

Only with reference to the preexisting generic concept of found poetry is this political speech legible as a poem at all. As a poem, it in fact has a certain lyrical quality, a playful attention to

of us including Perloff herself continue to think in reference to the further historical formations of the idea of the romantic lyric as it continues to develop and exert its influences.

the rhetorical doubling that unfolds, “As we know,” when we talk about what we know and do not. The text’s primary historical referent—the question of whether Iraq might have provided weapons of mass destruction to terrorists—may be forgotten while the text remains an important example of twenty-first century found poetry or of poetic epistemology.¹⁴ Assigning a text to a generic category does not dehistoricize that text so much as displace its historical relations—here, exchanging the history of US war in Iraq for the history of found poetry and, indeed, the history of poems about ignorance. The aesthetic and philosophic interests of Rumsfeld’s statement, meanwhile, are available for assessment to the extent that it is assigned some generic status other than that of a press briefing.

“Lyric Ignorance” performs an analogous series of displacements by offering technological readings of poetry and criticism that would not consider itself “digital” or even meaningfully informed by technology at all. Poets have long experimented with technology, and since the proliferation of computers in the 1980s, such work has become increasingly visible in academic discussions of contemporary poetry. However, the effects of technology upon current poetry cultures are subtler and more pervasive than such conspicuously digital experiments might suggest. It would make little sense to count as “digital poetry” any poem written on a laptop, but the proliferation of word processors and other quotidian technologies has deeply altered the practice of reading and writing. Lessons gleaned from avowedly digital poetry do not necessarily indicate how less obtrusive and less consciously chosen technological means have altered other poems, since the effects of new technologies do not vary only in their intensity. In other words, the laptop computer might have changed my writing practice in manners not just

¹⁴ Rumsfeld produced his formula in response to a question about terrorist ties to Baghdad, and such a question falls *a fortiori* outside the realm of unknown unknowns precisely because the question specifies it as an unknown (Dept. of Defense). Edmund Gettier provides a philosophical formalization of doubled ignorance, in his claim that the Aristotelian formula of “justified true belief” does not always amount to knowledge; wherever it does not, Gettier locates a subject who does not know he does not know.

less intense but of a completely different type than the technological effects to be seen in a digital scholarly edition or a series of Web-based animated poems. Of course, like their putatively non-digital peers, new media poets have engaged with the lyric genre in many compelling ways, not only by subverting lyric conventions but also by reworking and invigorating them. But poetry criticism that privileges conspicuously digital texts often avoids discussing the lyric, assuming instead that experimentation will be anti-lyrical.¹⁵ Nearly every critic nowadays writes with MS Word or a similar program, and many read as much on laptops as in print. Even peer-reviewed articles formatted for print have become more readily available online. In short, numerous scholars who do not consider themselves “digital humanists” have found their research and writing practices subtly but thoroughly transformed by new equipment, and the habit of marking some practices and not others as “digital” stifles awareness of these subtler changes. Those who strictly follow N. Katherine Hayles in her judgment that “literature in the twenty-first century is computational” may miss some important ways in which literature produced and consumed through computers is, as Hayles herself promises in her subtitle, also literary (43). This study thus focuses on a genre that has long represented the most rarified literariness, arguing that technology continues to shape the afterlives of the lyric in largely unrecognized ways.

Tracing the rhetoric of not-knowing in both critical discussions of the lyric and poetic production itself, “Lyric Ignorance” shows that the past half-century of technological development has often blurred the distinction between these activities, so that writing often looks like the product of readers, reading like the activity of writers. Electronic computers operate

¹⁵ One notable exception is Carrie Noland’s *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (1999). Noland works from a primarily French archive and takes a more capacious view of “the lyric” than I— involving contemporary musical performance, for instance. Likewise, her opening chapter discusses Rimbaud and a “Traffic in the Unknown,” but I take it that her idea of the unknown shares little with my account of lyric ignorance.

through processes of encoding and decoding, a transcriptional logic that reads as it writes and vice versa. Accordingly, the chapters of “Lyric Ignorance” make no strong distinction between critical and creative responses to a given poet. I discuss a poet’s legacy simultaneously in terms of the critical claims scholars have made about her and of the more recent poetry her work has occasioned, asking how these together have shaped her reputation. Many of the ostensibly “creative” responses discussed herein provide as much skeptical rigor and critical perspective as the best scholarly analysis, and the ostensibly critical writing often brims with lyrical verve and figural artistry. Such interplay between readerly and writerly response befits the study of genre, for a genre develops both at the tip of an author’s pen and within the matrix of expectations that any reader brings to a text. However, the discourse of ignorance also enables especially intense scrutiny of one key difference between critical and literary writing—namely, the assumption that criticism does and should aim to produce knowledge.

Third and finally, “Lyric Ignorance” contests the assumption that electronic computers work primarily as “information technologies” and argues instead that various modes of ignorance often shape our interactions with new media, including as we read and write poetry. Most scholars of the literature/technology interface understand computers and related devices as primarily informatic—as enabling the collection, manipulation, and distribution of information.¹⁶ Consequently, the predominant models for involving computers in humanities scholarship—including code studies, textual analysis, systems theory, data mining, e-literacies, and object-oriented ontology—emphasize technology’s power to render positively given information that

¹⁶ Recent work on literature and technology includes C.T. Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (2007) and *New Directions in Digital Poetry* (2012); N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008); Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2008); Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism* (2008); and Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (2005). To varying degrees, all assume that computers deliver and manipulate positively given information.

might otherwise remain unapparent. In his influential *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2007), for instance, Franco Moretti analyzes historical publication records to graph the rise and fall of various fiction genres—the epistolary novel, the gothic, the historical. Computers provide Moretti with a way to parse data whose apodicticity is assumed ahead of time, as in the presumption that we can reasonably adjudge the boundary between one genre and another or discern a genre’s tail of influences. Less informatic roles of technology, such as the material barriers to archival preservation and the often uncertain material histories of composition, remain peripheral because they do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis. In such cases, the critic models a text’s technological aspect after the computer’s quasi-mathematical formalism, its structure as a repository and manipulator of digits. However, this emphasis upon computers as informatic machines has not only limited critical accounts of the relation between poetry and technology—a relation often shaped by ignorance—but also elided important aspects of our interactions with computers per se.

Quotidian interactions with computers are often shaped not by purely instrumental knowledge but by ignorance of one kind or another, by some mode of thought that is not rationally organized in relation to information. It is quite common to find computers frustrating, disorienting, confusing, difficult, or obscure. Indeed, technology’s power to reorganize our sensorial and epistemic world suggests that even when human-computer interactions unfold as planned, they still often leave us displaced or boggled, rather than informed and enlightened. Media critics have long understood this, even if literary scholars have not. Indeed, Bernard Stiegler dedicates the second volume of his media-theoretical trilogy, *Technics and Time*, to the concept of disorientation, which he sees as the guiding logic of techno-human coevolution at every scale from phenomenal experience to geopolitics. Steigler is far from alone among media

theorists in unpacking technology's oppositions and resistances to rational understanding, but such work has not prevented literary critics from seeing electronic computers primarily as instruments of knowledge.¹⁷ "Lyric Ignorance" corrects this tendency by examining how technological developments since the middle of last century have energized and sustained the rhetoric of ignorance as a marker of the lyric genre.

While the turn away from technology's informational function might seem anathema to modern computer science, that field's key problems and guiding principles in fact exhibit a sustained interest in weak ignorance. Computer and software designers often explore computational strategies to negotiate uncertainty and, more interestingly, to employ uncertainty and disorder in the service of computation itself. In his famous article on "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," Alan Turing models the test of artificial intelligence upon a parlor game in which a player must guess the gender of a concealed person based on his or her responses to questions. A computer passes the "Turing test" and qualifies as intelligent if a human inquisitor *does not know* whether he is chatting with a real woman or a computer posing as one. Ignorance about personal identity continues to shape digital culture. Online practices ranging from erotic exchange to copyright infringement rely on the anonymity computer networks sustain, producing novel kinds of social contact. Meanwhile, mathematical uncertainty enables important principles of computer programming. Computerized randomness, for example, improves the chaotic models used for meteorology and makes the actions of computer opponents in video games less predictable, more naturalistic. Despite the fundamentally deterministic structure of electronic

¹⁷ Shaheed Nick Mohammed explicitly links new media with ignorance in *The (Dis)information Age: The Persistence of Ignorance* (2012). As his title suggests, however, Mohammed focuses on questioning "the notion that these technologies and their popular modes of usage necessarily lead to a more informed public" (ix). He points out that the proliferation of computers "has not necessarily led to fundamental social change" of the sort the Information Age was expected to bring, and in his plaintive opposition to technological disinformation, he shares neither Stiegler's techno-ontological interests nor my effort to show why poets and critics have found the rhetoric of ignorance appealing.

computers, programmers have developed an array of ways to render computational uncertainty. “Lyric Ignorance” rarely delves into such technical analysis, focusing instead on the phenomenological ignorances that inform human-computer interactions, but randomness and other modes of uncertainty support computer processes in important ways.

The computer scientist’s strategies for putting ignorance into the service of knowledge in fact exemplify a broader receptivity to the discourse of ignorance in a variety of scientific fields. Instead of imagining science as strictly the domain of rational competence, cold objectivism, and hard facts, several scientists and philosophers of science have recently offered compelling accounts of ignorance’s role in the production of knowledge.¹⁸ One would expect studies of ignorance to flourish still more widely in the humanities. After all, humanities disciplines allow greater leeway with regard to evidence and verifiability, making them more amenable to uncertainty and vagueness. Advocates of the humanities often claim such fields can better address complex questions that lack definitive answers—as, for example, when Gayatri Spivak describes “what is specific about the literary” in literary criticism as “learning to learn from the singular and the unverifiable” (“Speaking” 5). Humanities scholars have developed multiple vocabularies to describe the others of knowledge—including false consciousness, for example, and displacement—but rarely have these fields put ignorance itself directly at stake.¹⁹ Most treatments of ignorance per se in the humanities provide philosophical approaches to skepticism and critique, focusing especially often on the rhetoric of ignorance in Socratic thought. Peter Unger’s celebrated *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (1970), for instance, argues narrowly if

¹⁸ Recent scientific accounts of ignorance include Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (2012); Matthias Gross, *Ignorance and Surprise: Science, Society, and Ecological Design* (2010); and Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008).

¹⁹ On Marx and Freud as providing theories of ignorance, see Sandra Harding, “Two Influential Theories of Ignorance and Philosophy’s Interest in Ignoring Them,” part of a special section on ignorance in *Hypatia* 21.3 (Summer 2006): 20-36.

also quite effectively for serious reconsideration of classical skepticism, and Douglas Walton's *Arguments from Ignorance* (1996) takes a rhetorical approach but focuses on *ad ignorantiam* argumentation.²⁰ "Lyric Ignorance" contributes to the still limited discussion of ignorance—its rhetoric, politics, and poetics—in the broader context of humanities scholarship. In so doing, it highlights key challenges that weak ignorance poses to some basic assumptions about the purpose of such scholarship, for instance by asking how criticism about a poem that espouses or pursues ignorance can best coordinate the relations among knowledge and value set up between any critical text and its object of study.

* * *

"Lyric Ignorance" begins with a chapter on the rhetoric of ignorance that has shaped recent affective readings of Emily Dickinson, arguably the most consequential figure for the development of the American lyric. Multiple senses of *possession* have guided affective approaches to Dickinson since the 1980s and informed current ideas about the lyric. The claims to possess Dickinson begin with Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) and continue in criticism by Cristanne Miller, Lori Emerson, and others. In such contexts, a "possession of Dickinson" can mean an object she owned, a claim of social or sexual privilege, or an idea that her poems render us affectively possessed, captive to powerful feelings. Through these possessions, Dickinson's respondents position affect as a kind of weak ignorance, a collaborative other of knowledge. Appeals to possession as a trope of affective response coincide with increasing interest in Dickinson's material possessions, especially her manuscripts, letters, and enclosures. Contemporaneously, new technologies for publishing and reading have made visual

²⁰ Other philosophical treatments of ignorance include: Nicholas Rescher, *Ignorance: On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge* (2009); Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (2001); Michael J. Zimmerman, *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance* (2010); Daniel Stoljar, *Ignorance and Imagination: The Epistemic Origin of the Problem of Consciousness* (2009); and Martin McAvoy, *The Profession of Ignorance* (1999).

contact with her handwriting much more common, but instead of providing new textual information, manuscript images complicate ideas about what constitutes a Dickinson poem in the first place. In the wake of such displaced knowledge, affective reading enables a lyrically ignorant relation to the poems. Alongside critical discussions of Dickinson's lyricism, recent poetic responses by Michael Magee and Janet Holmes have underscored how textual equipment continues to shape Dickinson's influence upon US poetry. In *My Angie Dickinson* (2006), Magee enters phrases from Dickinson poems into Google and "sculpts" the results into short, spare poems that resemble Dickinson's both visually and in their attitudes about publicity and emotion. In *The Ms of My Kin* (2009), Holmes strategically erases words from poems Dickinson wrote in 1861-62, the outset of the Civil War, and the resulting fragmentary verses seem as relevant to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as they are to the politics of Dickinson's day. In both cases, technological play with Dickinsonian forms and with ideas of affective possession offer new perspectives on the socio-political significance of the lyric in the period of its afterlives.

Chapter 2 turns to Gertrude Stein, whose poetry many view as departing from lyric conventions. To examine how Stein's anti-lyrical reputation has influenced postwar and contemporary ideas about the lyric, this chapter reads her work through a series of chance-operational rewritings produced by the Language poet Jackson Mac Low. Like many of his peers, Mac Low viewed Stein as a vital precursor. Recent critics including Liesl Olson and Jennifer Ashton have complicated this story of avant-garde inheritance, but Mac Low's peculiar method for rewriting Stein raises important questions about the posture that anti-lyrical experiments assume in relation to literary and political histories—questions we might be at pains to answer if not for Stein's own treatment of the same issues. To produce his "Stein" poems, Mac Low used a strange reference book titled *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal*

Deviates. Published in 1955 by the RAND Corporation, this book consists almost exclusively of a vast table of random digits, created to help scientists at Los Alamos with the mathematics involved in designing thermonuclear weapons. Poets often view chance operations as unsettling contemporary aesthetic and political influences, a strategy of historical ignorance. Indeed, Stein and Mac Low share a concern that lyric conventions elide the destabilizing effects of randomness upon historically situated value-judgments, and both view aesthetic appeals to randomness and related concepts—chance, chaos, contingency—as capable of sustaining a defensive ignorance about the more threatening forms of disorder in the actual world. However, they negotiate this relation between lyricism and historical randomness in very different ways. Mac Low’s choice of compositional equipment insinuates a specific and uncomfortably militaristic history within the scene of writing. It thus suggests that even a poetic practice intent on decontextualizing itself historically emerges from specific material histories. Mac Low’s poems trace the persistence of a lyrical voice through the supposedly mechanizing process of chance-operational and procedural writing, in order to express such concerns about the security of aesthetic value in the context of historical randomness. While Stein’s work explores more rigorous alternatives to lyric expression by responding to historical contingencies with a sense of playful malleability, Mac Low’s rewritings position randomness itself among knowledge’s lyrical others.

The final chapter discusses how Frank O’Hara’s reputation as a popular socialite has shaped accounts of his relation to the lyric genre. Because many of his poems address friends by name, critics from Marjorie Perloff to Lytle Shaw and Andrew Epstein view him as constructing a lively persona before a familiar audience. By contrast, this chapter traces O’Hara’s rhetoric of address as it expresses alienation from his friends, his lovers, and even himself. Many poems addressed to a specific friend do not chronicle intimate social contact but bespeak estrangement

and anonymity—social and identitarian modes of ignorance. To convey the detachment of not-knowing himself or his friends, O'Hara reworks the rhetorical form of apostrophe, long affiliated with the lyric genre. When his poems hail a friend or an anonymous “you,” they do so not to make social contact but to figure such contact as a lapsed wish. While the first two chapters focused on technologies of visibility and inscription, O'Hara contrasts the apostrophic call of his poems with audio equipment such as the telephone and tape recorder. The latter make communication so easy that their technical nature eludes attention, but O'Hara's lyric address explores impediments to genuine contact. This chapter reads O'Hara alongside a more recent technological play on lyric address, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* (2001), which transcribes a recording of every word the poet spoke during one week, reproducing only one side of his many conversations. While O'Hara's apostrophe becomes emptied of the social contact it pursues, the ostensible solitude of Goldsmith's “soliloquy” becomes crowded with unheard interlocutors. Especially as they respond to technologies of the voice, these contrasting deployments of apostrophe and soliloquy, two rhetorical modes often associated with the lyric, bespeak a broader shift in attitudes about the social ignorance that lyric poems occasion. Responding to studies by Oren Izenberg and Keston Sutherland that describe the lyricism of social detachment, this chapter argues that a reworking of apostrophe enables O'Hara to explore the social affordances of lyric thought.

“Lyric Ignorance” discusses the changing reputations of its primary subjects—Dickinson, Stein, and O'Hara—by addressing both the scholarly and the poetic responses these writers have occasioned. It thereby opens a series of questions about the value of critical discourse and its relation to literary value. Alongside the scholarly writing these poets have occasioned, the poetic responses provide a developmental image of the lyric genre, showing its transformations and

influence in the period of its afterlives. In addition to asking what criticism can tell us about Stein's thoughts on the lyric genre, for instance, this study asks whether a poet positioning himself in Stein's wake might share her attitudes about the genre and, if so, in what ways. By counting these more recent poetic texts as part of a poet's reception, I try to take seriously the distinction between poetry and discourses of knowledge. Literary scholarship ostensibly aims to produce critical knowledge of one kind or another, but a poetic response need not share this aim. Instead of discussing the more recent poetry as poetry in its own right—or as creative collaboration, influence, or revision—this study asks how it produces readings of the earlier poets whose reception it helps to constitute. The poetic responses function as readings in the same sense that criticism does: they constitute a response to a poem, enriching and redirecting their reader's engagement with that earlier text. If these more recent poets provide models of uncritical response to the earlier poems—models of response that do not aim primarily at the production of critical knowledge—then I try to sustain this relation by avoiding strongly critical judgments about these recent poems themselves. Whereas I privilege the earlier works by Dickinson, Stein, and O'Hara as poetic masterpieces, I do not assert that any of the more recent poetry I discuss is necessarily very good as poetry, though it certainly might be. Rather, its value for this study lies in its power to produce readings of the earlier poetry to which it responds, thereby helping to trace the afterlives of the lyric genre through the changing reputations of these three canonical poets. The readings that the contemporary poets produce might be compelling and instructive, or they might be partial and misguided, cautionary tales for the wayward critic. Either way, the effort to comment on them outside the normal critical protocols of critique and revelation helps to delineate the commitments of a critical project that does, for its own part, seek a critical perspective on uncritical rhetorics.

This study's deceptively banal central claim, that lyric poems often do not seek or produce knowledge, opens challenging questions about the purposes of literary criticism. It is far from obvious that critics can or should relate to lyric poems in strictly rational, skeptical, knowing ways. At times a poem might indeed solicit the critic's demystifying attentions—including, for instance, my own attention to the modern lyric's conditions of development. Other models of reading might place the poem in a position of wisdom, defamiliarizing or illuminating the world around us. Yet if the very constitution of the lyric genre relies upon the rhetoric that distinguishes lyrical thought from rational knowing, then perhaps the responsive critic must imagine a way of reading that does not seek to resolve poetic discourse to some condition of critical knowledge—whether historical, structural, metaphysical, poetical, or hermeneutic.

Some scholars recognize that literature's unsettled relation to knowledge and critique calls for a criticism that would deliberate its own relation to knowledge-production with equal care. They therefore explore the possibility of uncritical or ambivalently critical approaches to writing about literature. This is the central impulse of Eve Sedgwick's exploration of "reparative reading," for example, where she seeks alternatives to the paranoid "hermeneutics of suspicion" that has become "a mandatory injunction" for literary and cultural criticism (*Touching* 125). She is interested in

moving from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects? (124)

These rhetorical questions—these questions about rhetoric—enable "Lyric Ignorance" to view poetry's oppositional relation to knowledge not as an epistemological matter but as a question about how the rhetoric of not-knowing has constituted a genre and shaped the ways we assign

literary and critical value. When a text distances itself from knowledge or avows ignorance, how does this situate the text generically, and in what ways might it remain open to skeptical interpretation? Far from systematically advocating uncritical scholarship, my discussion of lyric ignorance ultimately affirms the closure of rationalist inquiry by rendering the rhetoric of not-knowing as itself an object of knowledge. I nevertheless aim to explore how such ambivalence about knowledge-production transforms the rhetoric of criticism itself, especially the ways that critics assign value to a poem or to a critical operation. Where the analysis of lyric ignorance does render knowledge after all, we see the rhetorical flexibility of such ignorance at work, its weakness and availability to support ways of knowing. And as the rhetoric of not-knowing helps to construct a genre, it produces a framework for the articulation of value, since genres help to contain and stabilize the concept of literary worth in the face of historical contingencies. Moreover, given the frequency with which “the lyric” seems to epitomize the literary per se, my positioning the lyric as a hinge between historical interpretation and the assignment of literary value may prove suggestive for broader questions about the historical status of the literary object.

An openness to less paranoid critical protocols enables more sensitive attention to the functions of ignorance, but it also leaves this project with at least one object of paranoid fixation—one factor that “cannot be a mere accident”—that has shaped “Lyric Ignorance” while remaining largely unaccounted. This is its recourse to key texts and ideas from gay and lesbian literature. Each chapter of this project treats a poet whose homosexuality has deeply informed their reputation, yet I spend relatively little time discussing specifically homosexual identities and acts. Even when “Lyric Ignorance” does discuss non-normative sexuality, it follows Sedgwick in describing the tendency of such relations to go unrecorded and thus to become involved in economies of ignorance. The opening chapter, for instance, discusses how Emily

Dickinson's homosexual attachment to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, has become an insistent object of ignorance, for we have neither concrete evidence proving sexual contact between the two (despite plenty of circumstantial evidence) nor even a clear sense of what such evidence would look like, if it did exist. The issue of Dickinson's lesbianism has proved formative of her reputation because it refuses to be either liquidated as baseless speculation or substantiated as a matter of fact. Far from considering non-normative sexuality peripheral to this study, I have found the conditioning effects of queer epistemology so overarching as to become easily ignored. The rhetoric of lyric ignorance frequently produces a politics of gender and sexuality—as, for instance, in the universalized “man” of my epigraphs, or in the common attribution of ignorance to women and sexual minorities. However, the corollary contribution of queer thought to epistemic rhetoric, to the language through which we claim or disavow knowledge, has proved even more enabling. From the Victorian closet to the recently ended policy of “don't ask, don't tell,” the public management of homosexual desire has produced a rich and varied rhetoric of not-knowing. Lyric ignorance would not have developed as it has, nor would it have become available to the same forms of critical scrutiny, without such abiding efforts to manage non-normative sexuality through the rhetoric of ignorance. By the same token, lesbian and gay writers have often appropriated and reworked techniques of closeting and outing in order to affirm the many erotic, aesthetic, social, and intellectual pleasures of ignorance; these efforts have exploited ignorance's remarkable flexibility and underscored its centrality to various discourses of value. Taking such developments as an ambient condition of the contemporary rhetoric of not-knowing, “Lyric Ignorance” examines how the discourses of gender and sexuality have conditioned the broader American social fabric, including the social imaginaries of the poems here discussed. If this study sometimes ignores the same matters of gender and sexuality

that have done so much to shape the rhetoric of ignorance in the first place, it does so to pursue a broader understanding of how claims against knowledge can cut across and complicate the epistemic structures that organize how we know, or do not.

“Lyric Ignorance” concludes with a reflection on “The Lyricism of Queer Ignorance.” This brief section offers some recuperative attentions to the largely unspoken ways in which queer epistemology and the history of gay and lesbian poetry have shaped the rhetoric of not-knowing. Whereas this study focuses on the substantive form of its key term, “ignorance,” the conclusion argues that the active form of the word, “to ignore,” in fact encapsulates the ambivalence and flexibility of weak ignorance. To ignore something, after all, means awareness without acknowledgement; one must know about a thing to ignore it, yet act as if one does not know. By giving an account of how “Lyric Ignorance” itself has sometimes ignored the queer contexts from which its key texts and ideas emerge, the conclusion explores the critical significance of ignoring. The rhetoric of ignorance troubles conventional approaches to the historicity and the value of a lyric poem, and tracing such claims against knowledge illuminates the lyric’s productive tendency to ignore history and to ignore value—to know them, that is, while suspending acknowledgement. In the process, the lyric’s impulse toward ignorance opens some challenging questions about the privilege of knowledge in current conceptions of literary scholarship, and by rehearsing these questions the conclusion gestures toward possibilities for future research.

Chapter 1. The Possessions of Emily Dickinson: Affect and Lyric Ignorance

Perhaps more often than any other Anglophone poet, Emily Dickinson has over the last few decades occasioned a surprising number of claims to possess her. The possessions of Dickinson begin with Susan Howe's famous book, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), though Howe borrows the formulation from Dickinson herself.²¹ Subsequent writers echo Howe's possessive title—as in Alicia Ostriker's "Re-playing the Bible: My Emily Dickinson" (1993), Karen Gee's "'My George Eliot' and My Emily Dickinson" (1994), Cristanne Miller's "Whose Dickinson?" (2000), Annie Finch's "My Father Dickinson" (2008), and Lori Emerson's "My Digital Dickinson" (2008). The language of possession has also informed poetic responses to Dickinson, such as Michael Magee's *My Angie Dickinson* (2007) and Janet Holmes's *The ms of my kin* (2009). Perhaps most telling of all is Philip Gura's "How I Met and Dated Miss Emily Dickinson" (2004), which recounts his online purchase of what many hoped was a previously unknown photograph of Dickinson. Gura describes how he "experienced what it really meant to possess, and be possessed by, a picture" of the poet. Why have recent responses to Dickinson so frequently drawn on the language of possession, and how has this language shaped Dickinson's place in American poetry?

As Gura's reciprocal phrasing suggests, possessive rhetoric sustains a lively switching between objective and subjective senses—between the person as an object possessed and as a subject who possesses. Through this ambivalence, "possession of Dickinson" can mean an object she owned, a claim to own her, a suggestion of erotic dominance, and an idea that the poems

²¹ An earlier possession of Dickinson appears in the lyrics to "The Dangling Conversation," a 1966 Simon & Garfunkel tune: "And you read your Emily Dickinson, / And I my Robert Frost." In conversation, Susan Howe has confirmed that her possessive formula comes directly from Dickinson, as described below. The notoriety of her book excludes Simon & Garfunkel as a relevant influence upon later possessions of Dickinson—although their insinuation of gender as an organizing factor in the possessions of Dickinson resonates throughout.

render Dickinson and her readers affectively “possessed,” captive to powerful feelings. This latter, affective sense is particularly reliant upon the ambivalence of possession, for it positions readers as both objects affected and subjects having affective states. As this chapter will argue, the ambivalence of possession has enabled Dickinson’s recent respondents to position affect as a mode of ignorance that marks the lyricism of her poems. Possessive responses to Dickinson support the kinds of lyric ignorance that maintain her preeminence among American poets and inform her reputation in the period of the lyric’s afterlives.²²

Tracing the possessions of Dickinson illuminates two ways in which the rhetoric of not-knowing shapes her reputation across a variety of contexts and genres, from literary criticism to contemporary poetry. First, possessive language helps Dickinson’s respondents to view affect as a mode of weak ignorance, a collaborative other of knowledge.²³ Affect here denotes a register of experience in which feelings take hold of us like objects, and it supports convictions not subject to skeptical interrogation. Feelings, by this view, are our most immediate point of contact with the world. In several ways explored below, claims of possession cast affective interpretation as a lyrically ignorant way of responding to Dickinson’s work. Second, recent appeals to possession as a trope of affective intensity have coincided with increasing interest in Dickinson’s material possessions—her manuscripts and letters, as well as enclosures, inks, papers, binding equipment, books, and other artifacts. Closer attention to such materials has done much to sustain lyric ignorance. Especially since the time of Howe’s book, the emergence of new equipment for writing, publishing, and reading has made this engagement with Dickinson’s

²² On Dickinson’s relevance to contemporary poetry, see *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 15.2 (Fall 2006) and 17.2 (Fall 2008). The first collects contemporary poets’ reflections on Dickinson’s influence, and the second is a special issue of criticism on “Emily Dickinson and Contemporary Poetics.”

²³ Among others, Fathi has addressed the function of “strong” or absolute ignorance in Dickinson’s work, arguing that her poetics of indirection “reflects awe toward the ineffable unknown,” which the poet associates with divinity (78). By distinguishing between stronger and weaker modes of ignorance, I aim not so much to suppress Dickinson’s religious faith as to point out that her thinking about ignorance often remains secular.

material possessions an increasingly attractive way to approach her. The internet has made visual contact with her handwriting more common among scholars and casual readers alike.²⁴ As Virginia Jackson puts it, these images recall “modern readers to an archaic moment of hand-written composition and personal encounter,” a return made possible by the very technologies this archaism seeks to forerun (*Misery* 10). By providing a sense of personal, affective contact with Dickinson, such equipment has not simply proliferated textual information as so much binary code, but has supported lyric ignorance about Dickinson’s work by inviting affective, rather than critical, responses to her material possessions. In other words, equipment for increasing the visibility of her holographs and other artifacts has not provided more knowledge about Dickinson but more ignorance, for it has often empowered affective responses that do not primarily present themselves as rational, critical modes of interpretation.

In part, this chapter responds to and extends Susan Stewart’s discussion of “lyric possession” in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002) and her earlier essay on the same topic. Stewart describes lyric possession as an “anxiety” about “poetic will” originating with the Platonic idea of a Muse and the resultant distinction between having and possessing knowledge (“Lyric” 34). She addresses possession primarily as a “haunting” and describes its relation to poetic “voice.” By contrast, the possessions of Dickinson evince a preference for visual, tactile, and material valences. Despite these differences, Stewart ends her chapter on lyric possession with a qualification worth repeating at the outset of mine: “By taking the notion of lyric possession as a description rather than a problem to be overcome or refuted, we attend to the many springs of a poem’s generation. By acknowledging the ways in which our voices are spoken through, we are bound to hear more than we meant to say” (*Fate* 143). When such

²⁴ Of the many critics who emphasize visual or physical contact with Dickinson’s manuscripts, the most influential have been Cameron, Crumbley, Emerson, Howe, Jackson, McGann, Martha Nell Smith, Socarides, Werner, and Wolosky.

ventriloquy is seen to obtain also in a variety of recent responses to Dickinson, including my own, then possession's importance to contemporary lyric ignorance has begun to emerge.

The inaugural possessive response to Dickinson, Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*, gracefully blends critical argumentation, autobiographical disclosure, and full-throated panegyric. It thereby anticipates the ways in which possessive rhetoric continues to inform both scholarly and poetic writing about Dickinson. Although the difference between poetry and criticism never fully disappears, this chapter follows Howe's lead by arguing that poetic responses to Dickinson share and even intensify the same possessive impulse evident in the criticism. It therefore begins by examining two recent books of poetry, Holmes's *The ms of m y kin* and Magee's *My Angie Dickinson*, which vividly illustrate how possessive rhetoric has shaped Dickinson's reputation. Having thus adumbrated the relations among possession, affect, and lyric ignorance, the chapter then turns to Dickinson's poetry itself, exploring how it deploys possessive rhetoric to position affect as a mode of ignorance. These readings provide a groundwork for understanding the critical possessions of Dickinson that began to emerge in the work of Susan Howe and Ralph Franklin in the 1980s and continue in current debates about Dickinson's lyricism and the digital archive. Investments in possessive rhetoric have led these critics to privilege affective response by virtue of its distinctness from knowledge. Correlatively, they also emphasize visual contact with images of Dickinson's handwriting and of the poet herself, often as means of discerning her erotic attachments and affective experiences. Inasmuch as such critical possessions rely on new media, they also inspire a final reconsideration of Holmes and Magee. By extending and reworking the possessive responses to Dickinson, their works highlight Dickinson's relevance to contemporary questions about politics and the social effects of technology. With particular evocative force, Holmes and Magee indicate not only that recent technological and aesthetic

developments have encouraged possessive responses to Dickinson but also that, through these responses, Dickinson has much to teach us about the socio-political effects of claiming not to know.

* * *

In *The ms of m y kin*, Holmes erases words and letters from Dickinson poems until the remains constitute verses even sparer and more elliptical than their originals—poems that now appear to address recent US wars in the Middle East. Her title also is an erasure: *The ~~Poems~~ of ~~Emily Dickinson~~*. Holmes explains her method in a prefatory note on the text, where she also writes that “I owe the project to the invitation of its epigraph.” Said epigraph is the first two lines of a Dickinson poem from 1861: “If it had no pencil / Would it try mine—” (F 184).²⁵ These few words already introduce the interchange between subjects and objects that the language of possession so often occasions, for in the same breath that Dickinson mentions her pencil, she speaks of the person who might borrow it as an object, an “it” rather than a “he,” “she,” or “they.” Among other effects, the impersonal pronoun elides the borrower’s gender, as “they” more often does. The rest of Dickinson’s short poem, which Holmes omits, does nothing to clarify the gender of this “it” that might borrow a pencil, although it does position the impersonal pronoun within a discourse about sexual possession and objecthood:

If it had no pencil,
Would it try mine –
Worn – now – and *dull* – sweet,
Writing much to thee.
If it had no word –
Would it make the Daisy,
Most as big as I was –
When it plucked me? (F 184)

²⁵ Unless otherwise noted, citations of Dickinson’s verse are from R. W. Franklin’s *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, hereafter cited in the text as F, followed by the poem number Franklin has assigned and, where applicable, the letter assigned to the variant at hand.

Who or what is “it”? One might think of a Muse—the entity that tries a poet’s pencil, lacking one of its own—but Muses are personal and typically female, soliciting “she” or at least “they” rather than “it.” Furthermore, the encounter between Muse and poet is seldom sexual enough to merit a word like “plucked.” Yet “thee” did not pluck the speaker either, despite all the love letters. Perhaps, as Holmes’s deployment of these lines suggests, “it” might point to a strangely depersonalized future poet, one who has “plucked” some inspiration from Dickinson’s writing. The borrowed pencil would then appear as both a synecdoche for Dickinson’s poetic influence and as a phallic sign of her power over a future writer—one rendered impotent enough to seem a mere object, an “it” possessed by Dickinson as a pencil might be. The poem thus positions Dickinson as both subject and object of possession, both the Daisy whose blossom is “plucked” and the subject who wields the erasable staff of poetic influence. This ambivalent function of possession renders an “it” whose identity remains obscure, more an object of ignorance or uncertainty than of knowledge, around which a variety of affective energies, both creative and procreative, seem to collect.

A similar synergy between affective and material senses of possession circulates through *My Angie Dickinson*. Magee’s is a book of “flarf” poetry, in which poets generally appeal to vulgar sensibilities, often drawing their language from the internet. Though Magee’s sense of visual form strongly recalls Dickinson, his vocabulary and phrasing suggest the twenty-first century more strongly than the nineteenth:

I’ll never sit on pleather again!
 Miguel would never — have dared pretend
 It took a Real Cowboy to pull it —

My innermost feelings — Can Be — like Mike —
 But if the Future is Matrix — like —

I can't wait to do some "bullet"! (077)²⁶

Flarf poets typically begin by running online searches for certain phrases, often phrases from other flarf, and then assemble the search results into poems. Gary Sullivan describes flarf "as collaborating with the culture via the Web" and as "the conscious erasure of self or ego" from poetic composition. By focusing on the objectifying effects of possessive language, this chapter examines the broader significance of such depersonalizing impulses in relation to Dickinson and affective reading. Here is how Magee explains his process for composing *My Angie Dickinson*:

I reread Emily Dickinson's Collected Poems and, as I did, performed Google searches using the phrase "Angie Dickinson" combined with bits of syntax from Emily Dickinson's poems: "Angie Dickinson" + "Hope is". Likewise I would sometimes integrate rhyming words into the search: "Angie Dickinson" + "with a" + "chimp" + "limp". Each poem involved a series of intuitive searches followed by a fine stitching together, the mouse replacing the needlepoint. (4)

The analogy with sewing recalls Dickinson's use of needle and thread to bind the fascicles. Like many possessive readers, Magee emphasizes the materiality of the poetic text and thinks carefully about the equipment used to produce it. Just as Dickinson poems are sometimes stitched together from scraps, written on old receipts and advertisements, Magee "cuts" and "pastes" language from the internet. He appropriates her techniques for putting a poem together, and he borrows "bits of syntax" rather than major themes. The book's strongest resemblance to Dickinson is visual. The short lines, long dashes, and capitalization of key words mean that if you stand back and squint, they look just like Dickinson poems. On closer reading, *My Angie Dickinson* is a chaos of pop-culture references, from Tony Blair to the GI Bill to Britney Spears. Through the language of commodity and celebrity, the poems explore a world in which our feelings no longer fully count as our own, but are nonetheless all we may have by way of certainty. In poem 77, the double inverted commas around "bullet" suggest at once the use of

²⁶ Quotations of poems in *My Angie Dickinson* are cited by poem number; the book precedes single- and double-digit poem numbers with zeroes, as above.

printer's bullets to format editions of Dickinson, the convention of enclosing search terms in quotation marks, and the sarcastic tone of Magee's pop-culture citations. (Given its proximity to the capitalized "Matrix," this "bullet" may have come from an online discussion of *The Matrix* [dir. Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999], the film that popularized the special effect called "bullet time"—one of Magee's many cinematic allusions.) Meanwhile, the poem's rhyme scheme of linked tercets follows a hymnal form seen in many of Dickinson's three-line stanzas:

I cannot buy it – 'tis not sold –
 There is no other in the World –
 Mine was the only one

I was so happy I forgot
 To shut the Door And it went out
 And I am all alone –

If I could find it Anywhere
 I would not mind the journey there
 Though it took all my store

But just to look it in the Eye –
 "Did'st thou"? "Thou did'st not mean", to say,
 Then, turn my Face away. (F 943)

Both poems understand possession as affective and material, though their stories differ. Dickinson describes how the joy of having something leads to forgetfulness and loss. Despite the emphasis upon possession, this loss appears outside of mass production and commodity exchange: whatever "it" is, "'tis not sold," and there is "only one." Even as the lost object evades economization, the poem does economize ignorance in a system of knowing and feeling. The happiness of possessing a loved object takes hold of the speaker; this intense emotion undoes her mindfulness and leads to forgetting. The closing stanzas imagine a reversal of that exchange, whereby detachment enables the bereft speaker to forget more shrewdly, answering the object's painful departure with her own turning-away. The staging of this confrontation and demurral

through the personal pronoun “thou” suggests Dickinson’s lost object may be a *who* rather than an *it*.²⁷ The possessions of Dickinson often involve such personalizing and depersonalizing transitions from *it* to *who* and back again. Dickinson’s language of possession and loss in this poem responds to an idea of ignorance as a stultifying, de-socializing influence. Her energetic sense of affective social contact enables a recovery from this depersonalizing ignorance. For many of Dickinson’s respondents, by contrast, affect itself suggests a solipsistic inwardness that blocks social connections. For Dickinson and her respondents alike, however, the possessive rhetoric that distinguishes affect from knowledge facilitates these transitions between an *it* of inert matter, subject to claims of possession, and an affectively sensitive *who*, possessed of powerful feelings. As it facilitates such transitions, the rhetoric of possession illuminates the socializing and personalizing energies of Dickinson’s poetry and the affective responses it continues to occasion. Virginia Jackson and others have argued that these pathways of loss and recovery generate an overriding pathos in relation to Dickinson’s work, and this affective texture has done much to secure Dickinson’s prestige as an author of lyric poetry.

Magee’s poem opens far less nostalgically than Dickinson’s. When he writes, “I’ll never sit on pleather again,” this may not be a lament so much as a renunciation, a promise to one’s own chafed legs. Dickinson luckily never sat on pleather in the first place. Nor did she wish to “be like Mike”—that is, like Michael Jordan—nor like his predecessor in sloganeering, “Ike” Eisenhower, nor like Michael Magee, nor the Cowboy Miguel. Yet as Howe’s work and other projects of historical recovery remind us, Dickinson’s intellectual milieu unfolded through similarly personal encounters in a network of distant figures, whom she sometimes admired with

²⁷ Diehl provides a psychoanalytic reading of melancholic loss in Dickinson, arguing that “possession of the other depends upon a projected loss that functions as a gain” (371). This psychic circuit of loss and recovery is analogous to the economies of recovered ignorance I trace in this chapter, though my phenomenological attentions hew more closely to material possessions and their histories.

a language of possession. In this sense, her “Future is Matrix” just as ours has been—one in which “My innermost feelings” count at once as the texture of experience most surely my own and as the form of interest that coordinates my attachments to (and loss of) others. My feelings, so inalienably *mine*, seem a vital resource for interpreting experience, and the closest social contact would seem to unfold through affect. But as a mode of thought other than knowledge, an ignorant register of cognition, affect also admits of the vagueness and uncertainty that produce distances between people.²⁸ In this way, the rhetoric of possession represents both the promise of affective contact and the threat of social distancing. In the foreword to *My Angie Dickinson*, Magee confirms that his book is very much about such “innermost feelings” as they relate to reading Dickinson:

I was curious as to whether I could, using some of Emily Dickinson’s forms, evoke in my own readership that combination of shock, bewilderment, excitement, pleasure (a process of dis-orientation and re-orientation) that I imagined Dickinson’s earliest readers must have felt when reading her work. (4)

Bewilderment and shock mark affective forms of ignorance that Magee imputes to Dickinson’s first readers, responses that upset familiar “orientation” and resituate us. Affective response generates an ignorance that productively displaces rote knowledge, ultimately yielding a “re-orientation” that transforms ignorance into new knowledge—a process like defamiliarization.²⁹ This exchange among ignorance, affect, and knowledge echoes Susan Howe’s notion that affective responses carried Dickinson’s first readers away from familiar knowledge and into new perspectives:

²⁸ Some critics view affect as distinct not only from knowledge but from cognition *tout court*. Commenting on Dickinson’s response to poetry “as if the top of my head were taken off” (L 342), Maria O’Malley claims that “the analogy refers to an affective response, and not to cognition” (66). By contrast, I understand affection as a mode of cognition but an other of rational knowing—just as breathing and seeing involve cognitive processes without which they would not occur, yet do not fall within the capture of *logos*.

²⁹ As Shlovsky puts it, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’” (5).

The recipient of a letter, or combination of letter and poem from Emily Dickinson, was forced...through shock and through subtraction of the ordinary, to a new way of perceiving. Subject and object were fused at that moment, into the immediate *feeling* of understanding. (*My* 51)

Like the closing strophes of “I cannot buy it,” intense feeling occasions detachment and rapprochement, here in relation to ordinary ways of knowing. The process culminates in a felicitous confusion of subject and object, of *it* and *who*, that could not occur in a reading practice more intent upon skeptical distancing and knowledge-production. Through this slippage, Dickinson’s work opens itself to a rhetoric of possession that operates both in relation to the material artifacts of her life and to the affective intensities her writing chronicles and occasions in readers. Both registers have underwritten a variety of claims to possess Dickinson. These possessive responses have sustained the poet’s centrality to ongoing debates about the nature and fate of the lyric genre, portraying her workshop as a space of particular affective energy and expressive ingenuity. And by inserting a wobble between objective and subjective frames of response, between the *it* and the *who* of possession, these responses have also shaped the social interfaces through which Dickinson’s identity-political significance continues to emerge.

* * *

Dickinson herself often figures emotional life through the language of possession, and as we have begun to see, such affective possession opposes itself to knowledge. Through this idea of being possessed by feelings, Dickinson responds to a certain apprehension about viewing people as objects, as dumb substance; by reading affect as a mode of ignorance, she imagines forms of social contact that a lack of shared knowledge would otherwise make unavailable. Of course, the commoner view of emotions as feelings we possess, rather than becoming possessed by them, also appears in many of Dickinson’s poems, but this configuration lacks the socializing effects seen when affects instead possess us. In an 1885 letter to Helen Hunt Jackson, the poet

writes, “Take all away / from me, but leave / me Ecstasy / And I am richer / then, than all / my Fellow men – / Is it becoming / me to dwell so / wealthily, / When at my very / Door are those / possessing more, / In abject poverty?” (F 1671C). By attempting to read ecstasy as an object possessed, Dickinson runs aground upon a contradiction. The material happiness of her spiritually impoverished neighbors does not vacate Dickinson’s responsibility to them, and her own forms of “wealth,” both affective and material, become the objects of a guilty conscience isolated behind the “Door” of a dual privilege. By contrast, the socializing affordances of affect are evident where feeling possesses us, as in “I cannot dance upon my Toes.” The poem explores different senses of possession, especially as these enable affective social contact. A poem about dance—and Dickinson wrote a few—it begins from a view of people as objects, potential elements of aesthetic performance. Dickinson explores this objecthood in relation to a problem of ignorance and a possessive idea of affect. Ultimately, the poem finds solace in the prospect of social contact achieved through the spectacle of a dancer’s affective possession:

I cannot dance upon my Toes –
 No Man instructed me –
 But oftentimes, among my mind,
 A Glee possesseth me,

That had I Ballet Knowledge –
 Would put itself abroad
 In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe –
 Or lay a Prima, mad,

And though I had no Gown of Gauze –
 No Ringlet, to my Hair,
 Nor hopped for Audiences – like Birds –
 One Claw upon the air –

Nor tossed my shape in Eider Balls,
 Nor rolled on wheels of snow
 Till I was out of sight, in sound,
 The House encore me so –

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention – easy – Here –
 Nor any Placard boast me –
 It's full as Opera – (F 381B)

These lines thematize lack. In the opening strophe, the speaker attributes her inability to dance not to a dispositional shortcoming but to the fact that no “Man” has instructed her—a tellingly gendered concept of learning. The first stanza ends with the poem’s only affirmative instance of possession, but instead of enjoying the privilege of ownership, the speaker becomes the object possessed: “A Glee possesseth me.” The following three stanzas unfold in the subjunctive mood, and they describe how the speaker lacks proper equipment to express the glee that possesses her. Dickinson sent T.W. Higginson this poem in 1862, and Karen Jackson Ford rightly sees the claim to lack instruction by a “Man” as a defiant response to Higginson’s suggestion that she write more conventionally. However, when Ford affiliates this poem with a “poetics of excess” and claims that “Dickinson’s speaker takes on the gauze and ringlets of the ballerina and then dances with a vengeance to prevent herself from actually becoming the ballerina,” she overlooks the subjunctive bracket running from the start of the second stanza through the start of the fifth (37). Through this counterfactual description of what she would do “had [she] Ballet Knowledge,” Dickinson does not “control and dispel” the demands of poetic convention so much as she explores the relation between lack and shared feeling. In fact, the poem states that if she had the knowledge she lacks, she would *not* need to assume “gauze and ringlets” to deliver an affecting performance.³⁰ The poem thus organizes itself around all that the speaker does not possess.

³⁰ In Dickinson’s era American ballet was relatively undeveloped, and the ballerina condensed anxieties about nationality as much as gender. Most skilled ballerinas in Dickinson’s time were imported from Europe—occasioning concerns not only about the gauzy “excess” of the stage-props that Ford emphasizes, but also about the perceived hyper-sexuality of their dances, the Continental influences these represented, and the young nation’s inability to impart “ballet knowledge” to its own populace. Cf. Martin.

These deficiencies clarify how Dickinson understands relations among affect, knowledge, and possession. The first deficiency is “Ballet Knowledge” itself, the know-how that would allow her glee to “put itself abroad” in a dance. In this case, ignorance stymies expression of affect, but the glee itself seems to remain undiminished even as it lacks an outlet. Affect and knowledge emerge through different ratios of possession: where the former “possesseth me,” the latter is something I might possess, or not. The rest of the second strophe clarifies an incompatibility between emotion and the knowledge that would enable its expression. If the speaker had “Ballet Knowledge,” her expressions of glee would remain problematic, for they would “blanch a Troupe” and “lay a Prima, mad”—shocking even the other dancers and driving them crazy, whether with envy or rage. Madness might deprive the Prima of the knowledge required to express oneself in dance. More adequate knowledge might enable expression of feelings, then, but the resulting spectacle would pass the buck of ignorance and stymie other potential dancers. Though ignorance itself does not enable the expression of feeling, neither does its opposite, knowledge. Rather, expressive dance appears at the interface between an affective intensity affiliated with ignorance and, on the other hand, a technical knowledge that strong feeling would destabilize.

Instead of pursuing this circularity, the ignorant speaker continues in the subjunctive, now listing the props and affectations she would not need in order to captivate an audience, had she ballet knowledge. From the “Gown of Gauze” and “Eider Balls” to the “Ringlet” of hair, these absent accouterments appear superfluous; given ballet knowledge, the speaker could put her glee abroad without them. Nonetheless, these items can make “The House encore [her] so” powerfully that she is “out of sight, in sound” of their applause.³¹ Possession of objects such as a

³¹ In addition to the literal reading by which the speaker is “out of sight” because she is behind a curtain, the idiomatic sense of “out of sight” suggests synaesthesia, for the “sound” of applause indicates that her performance

gown may pale in comparison to possession of knowledge, but it does help to socialize a glee that had otherwise remained inwardly felt, unshared. The possession or lack of knowledge, however, remains paramount. The conditional structure of the second, third, and fourth stanzas gives “Ballet Knowledge” syntactic privilege, suggesting we read it not only as “knowledge of ballet,” but also metaphorically, as “balletic knowledge” or knowledge imbued with the grace of dance. The final stanza supports this reading, since it returns to knowledge and its relation to “Art” in general. The poem closes by avowing that if the speaker had “Ballet Knowledge,” but had none of the props aforementioned,

Nor any know I know the Art
 I mention – easy – Here –
 Nor any Placard boast me –
 It’s full as Opera –

The penultimate negative conditional bears unpacking. “Nor any know I know the Art” gets linked with the poem’s primary conditional, “had I Ballet Knowledge,” and with the main effect of all the poem’s conditions: “It’s full as Opera.” Where the first stanza situates knowledge in a social context of instruction and learning—and of Higginson’s patriarchal authority—the final stanza addresses what it might mean for the dancer’s audience to know (or not) that she knows (or does not know) the Art by which her glee could put itself abroad.

This doubling socializes the question of knowledge or ignorance, and it insinuates a few analogous circuits of social reciprocation. We can see what it means for an audience to know a performer knows her Art; most audiences of a virtuoso would qualify. And an uninformed spectator at the same event might not know that the performer knows her Art. We also can imagine how an audience might know that a performer does not know her Art, as in a poor performance. Speaking in the subjunctive, however, the poem presents a false alternative: “Nor

was “out of sight,” very good. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that this idiomatic sense emerged in the United States no later than 1835.

any know I know the Art” is counterfactual not just because no one knows that our speaker knows the Art she mentions “easy – Here,” but also because she does *not* in fact know it. She says so in the first stanza. Perceiving this leads us to ask what it would mean for an audience not to know that a performer does not know her Art. This phantom formula of doubled ignorance, “Nor any know I [do not] know,” provides an analogue for the expressive aspirations to which the poem gives voice. The poem aspires not to showcase technical know-how, but to render a feeling external so that it registers for an audience. Hence, the false negation of “know I know” insinuates a more affective formulation, “feel I feel,” as the ideal expressive destination of the glee that takes hold of our speaker. Inasmuch as the poem opposes feeling to knowledge through the rhetoric of ignorance and possession we have explored—inasmuch as it aligns feeling with not-knowing—it thereby imagines a scene of expressive performance in which making an audience “feel I feel” glee would be as simple as folding my ignorance upon their own, so that they “do not know I do not know” the Art by which I would hope to express myself. This doubling structure of ignorance and affective contact reappears in the contemporary discourse about one of Dickinson’s most appreciated poems, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” discussed below.

At the close of “I cannot dance upon my Toes,” Dickinson at last abandons the subjunctive mood and counterfactuals through which she imagines her ballet. The poem ends with the most direct statement we have had since stanza one: “It’s full as Opera –.” What is? We see an uproariously cheering house in the penultimate stanza, so we might read “It” as a full opera house; the metonym again insinuates a *who* in place of an *it*, the quintessential motion of Dickinson’s possessive model of affect. Yet the imagined abundance of listeners seems an improbably upbeat ending for a poem about frustrated expressions of feeling. In the first stanza,

Dickinson locates her glee “among my mind.” Appearing outside the bracket of subjunctive fantasy, the strange preposition usage might link with the poem’s final line to insinuate a latent sociality in even those feelings presumed private, unshared, inexpressible—such that what we feel within our minds might in fact be shared among them. Glossing “It’s full as Opera,” then, we could understand “it” not as the “House” mentioned in the previous stanza but as “glee” itself, which after all is the referent of the poem’s only other form of “it,” the “itself” in line five. By this view, “It’s full as Opera” indicates not a full house but a feeling of joy that is full-throated as opera, despite the difficulty of expression. Recalling us to the latent sociality of “among,” rather than the solitary interiority of “within,” the closing line takes solace in the prospect of shared feeling.³² Through its discourse of possession and lack, the poem addresses a problem of ignorance and, instead of seeking recuperation in the form of knowledge, suggests that affect can provide a means of social contact. Both the unstable reference of “it” in the closing line and the socializing potentials of affect, seen as a mode of ignorance, anticipate the very theories of affective response through which recent possessions of Dickinson have approached her work.

* * *

In the summer of 1859, Dickinson began one of the most widely appreciated poems of her corpus, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers.” Over the next few years, different versions of the poem circulated among Dickinson’s family, friends, and the general public. An early version appeared anonymously in the *Springfield Daily Republican* on 1 March 1862, likely sent by the poet’s sister-in-law, Susan. Dickinson included a later version in her first letter to T.W.

Higginson, dated 15 April 1862—these lines about the dead accompanying her famous query “if

³² Such a prospect may point to a specifically national affective community, for the capitalized “Opera” recalls the famous Paris Opera Ballet, the world’s oldest ballet school and in Dickinson’s time a prominent source of skilled dancers for the American stage (Martin).

my verse is alive.” In the previous year she and Susan had exchanged multiple letters discussing revisions of the second stanza. The surviving variations and correspondence have become a lively corner of Dickinson’s archive. They show, as several critics note, “Susan’s immense importance as a participatory reader of Dickinson’s works” (Hart, *Open* xxiii). Emily sent Susan poems not merely as favors to a beloved sister, but to get advice. Archival analyses of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” also underscore the importance of reading Dickinson’s poems in context of the letters, fascicles, and scraps on which they come to us, instead of isolating them from their discursive and material backgrounds.³³ Discussing a note from Susan to Emily, for instance, multiple critics mention that Susan jokingly writes “Pony Express” on the verso, but no one explains what this detail says about the poem or the women’s relationship. To be clear, I have no intention of reprimanding the critics who mention the “Pony Express” joke, nor can I myself offer a fuller interpretation of it. Rather, I mean to underscore the significance of this reiterated critical gesture itself, the impulse to point out a detail visible in the archive even (or especially) when the detail does not, after all, increase one’s knowledge about the text or its author. Reciting the words confirms the privilege of visual access to Dickinson’s archive, which promises to liven our image of her social exchanges, even if it gives us no more information than a standard edition would do.³⁴ In fact, “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” and the accompanying correspondence concern themselves with just such questions of affective social contact in relation to knowledge and ignorance.

³³ Martha Nell Smith has most consistently and persuasively argued that the poet’s relationship with Susan has been systematically elided and simplified—too often reduced to either domestic acquaintance or secret lesbian attachment. Sharon Cameron’s *Choosing Not Choosing* (1992) provides a seminal example of reading the fascicles in context, rather than isolating individual poems.

³⁴ Even Franklin’s variorum edition refers to the “Pony Express” but does not hazard an explanation (161). Still, especially in the context of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” it must be acknowledged that working with the manuscripts does produce clearer “knowledge” of “Susan’s involvement in Emily’s writing practices” (Hart, *Open* xxi). As I argue below, however, such knowledge ultimately telegraphs uncertainty about possible sexual contact between the women, and this uncertainty in fact coordinates the poet’s current identity-political meanings.

Largely unchanged during revisions, the poem's first stanza deploys images of the deceased in mausoleums to explore a conundrum about sentience, time, and loss:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
 Untouched by morning
 And untouched by noon –
 Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection –
 Rafter of satin,
 And Roof of stone – (F 124B)

The elect await resurrection, shielded from the changing slants of light that mark “morning” and “noon”; their “sleep” is “safe” from such worldly flux. However, “untouched” also bears affective connotations, suggesting that just as the elect are visually shielded from time, they are emotionally unmoved by worldly events. This gloss invites a play on “morning” as an alternate of “mourning.” The departed are “untouched by mourning,” unconcerned with the grief of their survivors. Interment seals them from visual markers of time and from affective contact with the living, a conflation of visual and affective access that the possessive readings of Dickinson continue to replicate. The despair of the bereft is here, as always, a matter of indifference to the dead, for they cannot know it. This play on “untouched” also figures affective exchange as a tactile immediacy, death as a loss of contact. The early version of the poem's second stanza situates the obliviousness and seclusion of death alongside images of a livelier but equally irrational natural world. The contrast reveals latent tensions in the poem's ideas about affect and ignorance:

Light laughs the breeze
 In her Castle above them –
 Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
 Pipe the sweet Birds in ignorant cadence –
 Ah, what sagacity perished here! (F 124B)

The natural world displays lighthearted indifference to the dearly departed, undercutting their supposed wisdom and importance. The kingdom of heaven may not be theirs but the breeze's,

since she has a castle. This laughing breeze, the babbling bee, and the piping birds indicate that, in the face of human mortality, the natural world goes on gaily as usual. If the bees and birds produce an “ignorant cadence,” then surely this deserves no more blame than the obliviousness of the dead, their “stolid” indifference to natural beauty. The ignorance of nature seems not so much a fault as a suggestion that the joke is on the dead. What sagacity perished here? Perhaps none at all, if the elect were comparably stolid in life. The cloistered ignorance of the dead thus meets its match in the aestheticized ignorance of the natural world.

This conceit of dueling ignorance proves untenable, though. An indifferent natural world provides no grounding for the trenchant closing line; the irony threatens to fall flat. After all, if natural ignorance grants the bird and the breeze a happy indifference to death, how can they also laugh wryly, knowingly, at the mortal scene below? Laughter marks a relation of interested or at least amused attention. Dickinson’s figures of natural ignorance encounter a common difficulty of prosopopoeia: how can nature evince total indifference to human affairs while also turning to face us with a seemingly interested gaze? In the name of a more successful closing, Dickinson must exchange these figures of natural ignorance for something that will ground her dark humor. In a literal sense, the “ignorant” is exchanged in her revisions of the second stanza, for the word does not appear in them. Her earliest revision of the stanza appears in a note to Susan, probably sent in 1861:

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
 Worlds scoop their Arcs –
 And Firmaments – row –
 Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
 Soundless as dots – on a Disc of snow – (F 124C)

The lines move between cosmic indifference (grand years, arcing worlds) and *memento mori* on a human scale (dropped diadems, surrendering Doges). The stanza closes in the breathless space

where the first version had failed to linger, with the “soundless” indifference of nature, this time figured synaesthetically as a disc of snow. In this later version, as Anne-Lise François puts it, “the two stanzas do not make a pious contrast between the vanity of heroic enterprises and the patient wisdom of those who now remain indifferent to worldly goods. Instead, the telescoping of celestial revolutions recasts the naïve pastoral otium of the 1859 variant as the playground of centuries, where the expanse of power is indistinguishable from its squandering” (204). In place of birdsong’s celebratory indifference, nature’s ignorance obtains a frigid aestheticism more akin to Wallace Stevens’s idea of “the nothing that is” (“Snow Man” 10). Both Stevens’s snow man and the soundless dots draw energy from seeming paradox—one ontological, the other synaesthetic—without abandoning a cold posture of natural indifference as Dickinson’s earlier version of the second stanza had done. The impulse is not cosmic but secular: “The untenable image of the ‘Disc of snow’ reduces the earlier astronomical images...to something that can hold no weight and certainly cannot last, and thus makes the reduction of epic telos—its coming down to nothing—inseparable from a return to the temporal and earthly” (François 204). Dickinson thus exchanges a verse about ignorance for one that performs it. The formal effects of ignorance find fuller expression in the latter version, where abundant dashes splinter its syntax. Dickinson’s galloping dactyls help to clarify her grammar, but the addition of dashes and removal of other punctuation lends the stanza a fragmentary quality. This effect is more intense in the original note to Susan from which we have this revision, where the first line and several others are split:

Grand go the Years – in the
 Crescent – above them –
 Worlds scoop their arcs –
 And Firmaments – row –
 Diadems – drop – and Doges –
 Surrender –
 Soundless as dots – on a
 Disc of Snow – (Smith, *Writing*)

Perhaps a function of Dickinson's narrow stationery and perhaps a deliberate choice, this formatting further fragments Dickinson's syntax and the visual texture of her work. Franklin's variorum edition does not render these line breaks, but his notes mention them. If his lineation were proper, one might expect to find it in the version copied into Fascicle 10, but there the lines break as above. The later copy sent to Higginson contains even more line breaks (Boston Public Library). Franklin does provide that version in his edition, though he mistakes a dash after "Crescent" for the crossbar of the *T*. Franklin's regularizations make it easy to overlook the fragmentation and syntactic uncertainty that the increasing numbers of dashes and line breaks render in the revisions of this stanza.³⁵ These enable a poetic language less intent upon providing knowledge; they generate a paratactic rhythm content not to make strong claims, and thus help the reader inhabit an ignorance where the earlier version had merely described one. As we see from the dash Franklin overlooks, it can be difficult to discern between a dash, a pause between pen-strokes, the cross of a *T*, or some errant mark. Likewise, in many cases we cannot say whether a line break is intended or is merely the result of Dickinson's unusually large script in relation to often narrow stationery. This irresolvable ignorance about the most basic formal questions should be recognized as itself an important factor in the experience of reading Dickinson. The unsure status of these formal elements suits their function in this poem quite well. In the revised second stanza, dashes and line breaks interrupt and block the problematic argument about natural ignorance provided in the earlier version. Through them, the poem exchanges an explicit reflection on nature's happy ignorance for a more direct performance of ignorance, foisted onto the reader through formal, syntactic, and conceptual instabilities. The

³⁵ Crumbley provides the most extensive and authoritative account of Dickinson's dashes. He reads them as "highly nuanced visual signals intimately linked to Dickinson's experiments with poetic voice," arguing they support her "strategy for investing readers with the authority to challenge social determination of linguistic content" (1-2).

new stanza may seem to assert knowledge in the form of a cosmic history, but its descriptions exceed the scope of human consciousness and are thus more likely to occasion nihilism than functional knowledge.

The increasingly fragmentary versions of the second stanza are most powerfully rendered in the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, edited by Martha Nell Smith and Lara Vetter, where holograph images of the poem and attendant correspondence join editorial commentary to form a distinct section of the archive, called “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem.” Alongside high-quality images of the originals, the site provides transcriptions of both letters and verse as lineated in holograph; it thus offers an alternative to Franklin’s regularized lineation.³⁶ In their Introduction to the collection, Smith and Vetter praise these materials for showing us that “Sue was a vital participant in the composition and transmission of the poem”—and likely many others. They include a note from Susan that asks, “*Has girl read Republican*,” possibly but not certainly a reference to the printing of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” there. They find the note compelling because in it Susan complains, “It takes as long to start our Fleet as the Burnside” (a reference to the Burnside carbine, a Union weapon). The editors believe the plural possessive, “our,” refers to the poems and, by attributing joint ownership, indicates Susan’s important contributions to a poetic oeuvre too often seen as the product of an isolated genius.

Insomuch as the materials in “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem” support viewing Emily Dickinson’s work as a collaboration with Susan, the evidence stems from an intense discourse about emotions that frames the women’s notes on the poem. The collection’s first holograph is the note from Susan about “our Fleet,” which strangely begins with indifference: “Never mind

³⁶ Unfortunately, the *Dickinson Electronic Archive* does not include the version of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” sent to Higginson, nor any holograph images of material sent to Higginson. It does, however, provide a link to the Flickr account of the Boston Public Library, which provides holograph images (without transcriptions) of the letters to Higginson, including this first one.

Emily – to-morrow will do just as well – Don’t bother.” The editors follow this with a note in which Emily offers Susan a revision of the second stanza (F 124C) and expresses hope that “perhaps this verse would please you better – Sue.” Emily and Susan’s discussion of the poem is based upon reciprocal affective investment, a desire to know the other’s feelings and to give pleasure, rather than a more impersonal aesthetic or intellectual standard of judgment. Accordingly, Susan later expresses her dissatisfaction with the revision in affective terms, rather than a clear parsing of its flaws. She writes, “I am not suited dear Emily with the second verse...it does not go with the ghostly shimmer of the first verse...You never made a peer for that verse...I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never *can* again.” In 1890, Higginson would concur, calling the revision a “too daring condensation” but admitting “it strikes a note too fine to be lost” (393). For Susan, the problem is not that Dickinson’s “condensation” leaves her cold, but quite the opposite. The first stanza hauntingly depicts the eternal cold of death, making her wish for the warmth of a fire even as it reminds her that she “never *can*” find full solace in earthly comforts. Neither version of the second stanza proves sufficiently bone-chilling for Susan. Still, “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem” traces Emily’s continued efforts to make “a peer” for the first stanza. She would produce two more versions, both included in Fascicle 10 and largely thought inferior to the first two attempts. We have a record of her sending Susan only one of these later versions. The letter begins not with a salutation but a single question, “Is *this frostier?*”

Springs – shake the Sills –
 But – the Echoes – stiffen –
 Hoar – is the Window – and
 numb – the Door –
 Tribes of Eclipse – in Tents
 of Marble –
 Staples of Ages – have
 buckled – there

I again follow the lineation in the holograph from “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem,” rather than the regularized Franklin version, to show that the fragmenting effects of line breaks and dashes continue, even intensify. Here Dickinson hews to the imagery of the tomb that telegraphs mortal cold so powerfully in the first stanza; instead of contrasting this imagery with natural vitality, phrases like “Tribes of Eclipse – in Tents / of Marble” align the two previously opposed strophes. The new stanza proves still more obscure, an even more “daring condensation” than the first revision. In the accompanying note the poet says she does not expect Susan to know what the stanza means, only to glean a “*frostier*” feeling from it.

Following the new stanza, Emily writes, “Dear Sue – Your praise is good – to me – because I *know* it *knows* – and *suppose* – it *means* –” (Smith, “Writing”). What praise? Susan says she is “not suited” with Emily’s revisions, so this may be “good – to” Emily in some less obvious way. Explaining why she thinks such frosty praise “good,” the poet produces the same structure of doubled knowledge we have seen in the poem written later that year, “I cannot dance upon my Toes.” That poem’s formula of doubled knowledge, “Nor any know I know the Art,” helps to clarify Emily’s view that Susan’s praise is good “because I *know* it *knows* – and *suppose* – it *means*.” Both formulae provide a manifest statement about reciprocal knowledge while undercutting the importance of knowledge itself. Reading Susan’s response, Emily may “*know* it *knows*” better than to praise inadequate writing. Knowledge thus enables discernment but does not provide pleasure. Given the goals of satisfaction guiding their exchange—Susan’s with the revisions, Emily’s with Susan’s responses—the “frosty” praise is good not as critique, but as something else. As I argue, the affective doubling of “feel I feel” haunts the later poem’s negation of knowledge in “Nor any know I know,” proffering affect as a basis of social contact; in the same way, “and *suppose* – it *means*” lingers inscrutably behind “*know* it *knows*,” as an

alternative to the distancing gestures of critical discernment. If Emily understood Susan's cold response as knowing, she would not insist on calling it praise but would view it at face value, as an assertion that Emily is incapable of writing a suitable second stanza. If the response is "good" as "praise," then it is because Emily can "*suppose* – it *means*," can draw its meaning (as praise) not from its own knowing criticism but from vaguer supposition. In response to the critical knowledge that would upset affective contact between her and Susan, Emily brackets the exchange of knowledge in a too-neat formation, "*I know it knows*." (One thinks of the chain-smoker's demurral, "*I know it's killing me, but nonetheless...*") She thereby prefers a less knowing attitude about their correspondence, so she can "*suppose*" Susan's feedback "*means*" to offer the affective satisfaction of praise. As in "*I cannot dance upon my Toes*," Dickinson imagines affective social contact in competition with the isolating asceticism of knowledge. In both cases, she responds by articulating alternative structures of reciprocity—"know it knows" running aground on "*suppose* – it *means*," just as "know I know" insinuates "feel I feel"—and she thus posits affective contact as an alternative to the exchanges of knowledge endemic to poetry criticism and ballet training.

Dickinson's efforts to produce a suitable second stanza for "*Safe in their Alabaster Chambers*" involve a performative strategy that exchanges knowledge for affective contact with Susan. Through parataxis and vague imagery, revisions of the second stanza perform ignorance, rather than thematizing it. Dickinson thus pursues a "*frostier*" affective texture even as she chooses to "*suppose*" Susan's criticism "*means*" to offer praise, rather than stark knowledge of a shortcoming. Readers of this poem's variants and related documents often pursue an analogous ignorance-strategy, whose goal likewise is closer affective connection rather than surer knowledge. Visual access to the holographs does not necessarily provide better knowledge of

these texts but multiplies and proliferates our ignorant relations with them. In their preface to “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem,” Smith and Vetter provide a kind of study guide, in the form of a bulleted list of questions, and these begin to adduce the lyric ignorance to be gained by viewing the holographs there presented:

- What is the identity of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” the poem under Emily and Susan’s consideration here?
- Is it a two-stanza poem with four different second stanzas, as their writings and the contemporaneous printing that Dickinson saw suggest?
- Is it a three-stanza poem, as rendered in its 1890 posthumous printing? Or is it in fact five one-stanza poems?

Viewing Dickinson’s holographs does not provide the improved basis for textual knowledge one might anticipate but heightens uncertainties about what even constitutes “the poem under... consideration.” If visual contact with these manuscripts does not improve textual knowledge, what purpose does it serve? By sustaining *ignorant* relations to Dickinson’s writing, this contact with her physical possessions authorizes affective responses to her work. Such responses understand affect as separate from knowledge. They often describe affect through a language of possession whose applicability to Dickinson’s material possessions, including the holographs themselves, strengthens this pursuit of ignorance as a response to her writing. Indeed, deploying these images in this way helps the editors to inscribe an intense affective relation between Susan and Emily, alongside their artistic collaboration. If these documents offer any knowledge at all, they provide the traces of affective contact. At the outset Smith and Vetter refer to Emily’s correspondent as “Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, her most beloved friend and sister-in-law.” The superlative wording insinuates the common (and reasonable) belief that Susan and Emily were in fact lovers, not simply “beloved” family. They later reinforce this idea, describing Emily’s attentiveness to “her beloved’s advice,” but they read this exchange primarily as evidence of “a literary dialogue that lasted for decades” and whose influence on Emily’s writing

is often underestimated. “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem” highlights the importance of the poet’s intellectual exchanges with Susan, often seen as mere household chatter, and thus challenges “literary traditions that have drawn sharp distinctions between ‘poetic’ and ‘domestic’ subjects.” Just as the collection of holographs disrupts such distinctions between literary and quotidian exchanges, the editors’ own language describes the women’s relationship as affectively intense and thus disrupts fixations upon whether they were lovers. Here too, the holographs and their apparatus solicit an ignorant relation to Dickinson’s life and work, one that ratifies the importance and intensity of Dickinson’s affective life—and of our affective contact with her—but without necessarily producing surer knowledge. In fact, both the poet and her readers deploy rhetoric about not-knowing in manners that privilege affective response by virtue of its distinctness from knowledge.

* * *

So far this chapter has left “affect” relatively unspecified. Such open-endedness is typical of affective criticism, since the term encompasses a variety of responses considered more closely bound to physical bodies than those classed as emotion.³⁷ I now hope to lend affect some specificity, but ultimately with the purpose of showing that in important ways, it is in fact constitutively unspecified. As a mode of ignorance, affect takes up unstable relations to the discourses of knowledge that would define it. We can begin to specify literary-critical theories of affect in relation to knowledge by lingering with a strange phrase from the earliest version of “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” the penultimate line’s idea of an “ignorant cadence” (F 124A). I have read this phrase as an image for nature’s overall ignorance, but what can it mean

³⁷ This implicit materialism of affect, largely a Spinozan inheritance, has further motivated the synergy between affective and manuscript-oriented readings of Dickinson. In the context of new media scholarship, it enables material figures for affect, such as Hart and Smith’s idea of “electric passion” between Susan and Emily (*Open* xvii). Massumi provides the most systematic contemporary theory of Spinozan affect in the context of new media.

for a *cadence* to be ignorant? Simon Jarvis fleshes out this idea of an ignorant cadence in his writings on prosody, including “Prosody as Cognition” (1998) and his more recent work. Starting in this earlier article, Jarvis aims “to multiply the difficulties, doubts and hesitations which might reasonably face any” rigorous theory of prosody. He is attentive to the idiosyncrasy that textures our individual prosodic experiences, which suggests that any text’s prosody is “not susceptible to exhaustive description (and this not as a contingent defect but as central to the peculiar kind of implicit cognition which the prosodic sense really is).” Prosody for Jarvis necessarily escapes any conceivable attempt to render it a steady object of knowledge; it is, rather, an object of ignorance. The idiosyncrasy of prosodic experience means that “prosody cannot be grounded on the model of the measurement of an object,” verifiable and factual. Yet he also traces “the expulsion of prosody from cognition” by universalist discourses of subjectivity; the interior of the rational subject admits no place for the accidents of linguistic forms, leaving prosody in limbo, neither objectively measurable nor transcendently subjective (“Cognition” 3-8). Jarvis therefore aims to restore prosodic experience’s status as cognitive, as a mode of thought, but he still opposes it to rational logic and knowing. He equates it instead with a notion of affective experience as a kind of thought. To position affect in this way, he appeals to a reading of the Cartesian *cogito* as referring primarily to affect, not to some rarified idea of abstract rational cognition, and in doing so Jarvis offers a bracketing rhetoric of doubled knowledge that recalls Dickinson’s own:

What grounds my being is not reflection, knowing that I know, thinking that I think, and it is thus not at all anything emptied of affectivity; it is rather the primordial fact of affectivity itself in so far as I am affect. The feeling of thinking, as the feeling which *I — am*, and not thinking about thinking. (“Musical” 69)

At least since Heidegger, Jarvis argues, Western philosophy has failed to recognize affect as the mode of thought to which the *cogito*’s self-affirmation refers; only the apodictic immediacy of a

body feeling itself can authorize this fiat of the *I-am*. By basing a theory of prosody on the living self-presence of affective thought, Jarvis provides a compelling idea of what Dickinson's "ignorant cadence" can mean. In response to "the expulsion of prosody from cognition, which declares *beautiful science* a null set" ("Cognition" 8), both Dickinson and Jarvis understand the prosodic textures of birdsong or lyric song as "ignorant cadence," a felt rhythm unfolding within the "affective duration" of thinking as lived experience, rather than rational distancing (13).

Jarvis bases his theory of affect upon the phenomenology of Michel Henry, whose work exemplifies one of the two theories of affect that have proved most influential for literary criticism, especially for affective readings of Dickinson. Alongside such phenomenological approaches, deconstructive theories of affective interpretation, especially those of Paul de Man and his readers, have played an important role in positioning affect as thought without knowledge.³⁸ Both phenomenological and deconstructive approaches view *pathos* as a key term for understanding affect. This concept's influence has made possession an important trope for privileging affect and has helped to cast affect as an other of knowledge, an ignorance. Here, though, phenomenology and deconstruction part ways. For de Man and his readers, *pathos* signifies an inherent instability or restlessness of affective response, frustrating interpretive certainty but rescuing affect from the threat of anaesthetic placidness; but for Henry *pathos* names the transcendental, pre-ontological affective tone of life feeling its own suffering.³⁹ Despite such differences, both theories have made the logic of *pathos* central to affective

³⁸ Those attentive to the "affective turn" will perceive that my focus upon deconstructive and phenomenological theories excludes at least one important approach to affect, the Spinozan/Leibnitzian line carried on in Deleuze, Negri, Massumi, and elsewhere. From a strictly philosophical standpoint, this may in fact be the most coherent theory of affect yet developed, but its ramifications for poetry criticism remain relatively limited. Spinozan affect's sympathy with phenomenological ideas of tactility and physical contact mean that much of what I say about the phenomenological approach will obtain as well for Spinozan theories. I do not address the latter in detail because their epistemological impulse makes them relative strangers to the rhetoric of ignorance.

³⁹ In this sense, Henry adheres to the Greek (and, ultimately, Christian) sense of *pathos* as transcendental suffering, de Man to the romantic, primarily Schillerian sense of *pathos* as an affective restlessness.

criticism. In doing so, they both mark affect's difference from knowledge and secure its privilege as a basis of interpretation.

Henry gives affect a special privilege in his system, and the onto-theological direction of his later work clarifies the logic of phenomenological appeals to affect.⁴⁰ In *Material Phenomenology* (1990), he follows the conventional division of Husserl's system into two problematics, those of time and intersubjective contact. After critiquing Husserl's theory of time-consciousness, he addresses the problem of intersubjectivity and produces an idea of phenomenological materiality as the basis for a solution. Henry teases out the substance of phenomenality itself; he describes "the mode according to which it originally becomes a phenomenon [*se phénoménalise originellement*]*—the substance, the stuff, the phenomenological matter of which it is made, its phenomenologically pure materiality*" (2). He posits transcendental *life* as the basis of this phenomenological substance, designates this substance itself as *affect*, and specifies the tone of living affection as *pathos*:

this invisible phenomenological substance...is not a nothing but rather an affect, or put otherwise, it is what makes every affect, ultimately every affection, and thus every thing possible. The phenomenological substance [*substance phénoménologique*] that material phenomenology has in view is the pathetic immediacy in which life experiences itself. Life is itself nothing other than this pathetic embrace and, in this way, is phenomenality itself according to the how of its original phenomenalization. (2-3)

Life's auto-affection, at once transcendental and immediate for each of us, enables intersubjective contact without the skeptical distancing inaugurated by the phenomenological epoché. Henry's specification of this auto-affection as pathos, a redemptive "primordial suffering of life" (134), signals the onto-theological metaphysics supporting his system. The absolutization of pathos opens a stable of images from Christian cosmology: "the cosmos or nature has its flesh

⁴⁰ For more on the "theological turn" in French phenomenology, see Janicaud, et al.

covered with large cuts and tears of emotional life” (23). For his part, Henry is forthright about his project’s speculative metaphysics. But by explicitly linking this with an uncritical vitalism, an ontology of the flesh, and a belief in the apodicticity of affective experience, Henry reveals that such precepts remain operative in less avowedly metaphysical appeals to Husserlian thought—indeed, even in those aimed at the closest possible contact with worldly substance.⁴¹

Henry uses possessive tropes to establish affect’s privilege and differentiate it from knowledge. Affect’s immediacy makes it primordial to rational knowing. “In its pathetic immediacy, absolute transcendental life...slips away from the regard and thus from every possible knowing, from everything that we call knowledge, speech, and *logos*” (92). Only through this oppositional priority to knowledge does affect become immune to the usual phenomenological reductions. Affect is privileged, in other words, *as ignorance*. Henry describes this privilege in possessive terms. Discussing the problem of Husserl’s isolated monad, confined to his own phenomena and unable to contact others, Henry uses possessive rhetoric to reject the confinement of affect to such a sphere: “reduced to its sphere of ownness and to what is its own, each ‘monad’ is in fact removed from what is its ownmost [*le plus propre*], namely, its own pathos” (116). The pathos of transcendental life is more mine than what is mine, for it textures my affective self-experience. As a mode of experience felt more closely than my own phenomenal impressions, pathos escapes monadic isolation; it becomes our most inalienable form of contact with the world. This language of possession supports appeals to the apodicticity of tactile impressions, often seen in phenomenologies of embodiment. Such appeals to touch’s physical immediacy, its sense of grasping and contact, commonly underwrite appropriations of

⁴¹ Like Henry, Jarvis openly avows metaphysicalism as a speculative stance in his work on prosody. An ungenerous reading of Jarvis might point out that his idea of “affective duration” mistakes affect for a temporal concept in Henry’s system, where in fact it provides an alternative to the inconsistencies Henry identifies in the Husserlian discourse of time-consciousness.

phenomenology in the service of affective reading. Henry's language does much to clarify the stakes of this possessive rhetoric for phenomenological appeals to affect.

One need look no further than Derrida's early writings on Husserl to grasp the metaphysics of presence guiding phenomenological appeals to affect and to understand thought's confounding reliance upon such problematic constructions of its outside.⁴² For theorists working in Derrida's wake, most notably Paul de Man, pathos signifies the stubborn return of an affective response that troubles rationalism with unsteadiness and claims of immediate contact with its objects. On the deconstructionist reading, pathos lacks the evidentiary affordances and the connotations of pious suffering it enjoys in Henry, but here too the discourse of pathos serves to mark affect's difference from knowledge and articulate its special interest through a rhetoric of possession. For deconstructionists pathos operates as an affective parabasis, a minimum of feeling that persists even to the point of registering the feeling of feeling nothing. As Rei Terada puts it in *Feeling in Theory* (2001), the "*economy of pathos*" shows us that "there is no such thing as the absence of emotion" (13). Instead, pathos marks the fact that "feeling *nothing* is *feeling* nothing, a feeling like any other," and it thereby accomplishes "a reproduction of emotion out of its diminution" (86, 81). Thus positioned as an affective minimum, pathos makes affect a "buoying but wobbly" (55) mode of response, for its self-reproduction out of its own diminution lends pathos an inherent instability. "Any apparent ebbing of pathos makes more as well as less pathos: the less pathetic the end of pathos is, the more pathetic it is that it isn't pathetic anymore" (14). Both phenomenological and deconstructive accounts thus position pathos as an irreducible ground for affective response, but the latter differ in viewing it as unstable ground, an insufficient basis for certainty.

⁴² See the essays collected in *Speech and Phenomena*.

As Terada so elegantly argues, the deconstructive account of emotions operates without an affirmative theory of subjectivity. Indeed, it suggests “that we would have no emotions if we *were* subjects” (14). The circuit of loss and partial recovery of pathos figures this distance between affective intensities and the subjects these had seemed to unite. Citing Derrida, Terada writes, “The full meaning of pathos, with its positive association between emotion and distance, crystalizes here, where ‘we neither can nor should feel the pain of others immediately and absolutely’” (34). Emotional distancing positions affect as a result of uncertainty about how to respond—a product of ignorance in relation to whatever occasions affect. This ignorance textures the systems of feeling that grow up around the pathetic parabasis. As Terada puts it, “we have emotions even though we can’t know which emotions we ought to have. If we truly *knew* which emotions we should have, we would no longer feel like having any” (89). Through the deconstructive reading of pathos, affective response appears as a result of ignorance about whatever occasions such response, and its product is not some kind of recovered knowledge but an extension of ignorance in (and as) affect itself. Terada closes her chapter on pathos with a familiar quotation from de Man’s *Allegories of Reading* (1979), which illuminates the implications for literary criticism of this linkage between pathos and ignorance:

Any question about the rhetorical mode of a literary text is always a rhetorical question which does not even know whether it is really questioning. The resulting pathos is an anxiety (or bliss, depending on one’s momentary mood or individual temperament) of ignorance, not an anxiety of reference...reading is dramatized ...not as an emotive reaction to what language does, but as an emotive reaction to the impossibility of knowing what it might be up to. (19)

My readings of the possessions of Dickinson can be seen as a response to de Man’s linkage of affect with an irretrievably ignorant relation to language, a response that itself might take the form of a rhetorical question: If an inquiry into literary rhetoric asks about the rhetorical function of ignorance in particular, how can such an inquiry understand the connection between the

conditions of its own articulation and the affective responses its own ignorance at once traces and occasions? In other words, what effects for the literary rhetoric of ignorance, rather than that of feeling, stem from this pathetic linkage between affect and not-knowing? Where ignorance in relation to a text seems both the occasion for and product of pathos, the study of affect as a rhetorical deployment of ignorance might clarify the literary and critical affordances of such rhetoric—without claiming to abrogate the linkage between affect and ignorance that has made both so crucial to literary rhetoric. Of course, one still worries that such questions proliferate ignorance in every direction, so that the rhetoric of not-knowing, like pathos, recognizes itself everywhere without yielding itself to critical resolution. Even such a metastasis of ignorant rhetoric leaves us with the same question de Man so often insinuates, about the extent to which our critical procedures can remain primarily aimed at rendering knowledge about an object as slippery as the literary text, when the text itself continually avows ignorance. In any case, my reading of affect as a rhetoric of ignorance is hardly the first to hazard such a wager.

In *Dickinson's Misery* (2005), Virginia Jackson draws on the deconstructive theory of pathos to trace the “lyric reading” of Dickinson’s texts, and she thereby explores the correlative limits of historical and literary knowledge-production. The lyricization of Dickinson occurs through a transition between two configurations of pathos. The first involves a pathetic relation to the poet’s manuscripts and related objects—her possessions—by which critics see them as almost lost traces of lyric expression in need of recovery. This recuperative impulse leads manuscript-oriented critics to seek out objects and aspects of Dickinson’s work that seem on the brink of loss; by viewing her possessions as ever in need of recovery, critics take up a pathetic relation to them. The second stage of lyric reading construes this pathetic relation to Dickinson’s possessions as holding the place of an impossible affective contact with the person of Dickinson.

These almost lost texts seem to record the semi-private expressive statements of a human subject named Emily Dickinson, so when we view them as always in need of retrieval, the object of that recovery becomes the poet herself. Through this transition, pathos renders Emily Dickinson as an expressive subject. The goal of recovering the poet herself has led critics, Jackson believes, to pluck Dickinson and her work from their historical contexts and to inscribe her in the universalist position of the expressive speech proper to the lyric genre.

Jackson does not advocate abandoning the investment in Dickinson's possessions that prompts this series of pathetic responses, for the loss of such possessive investments would simply occasion more pathos, perpetuating the cycles of loss and recovery that have lyricized her poems. In fact, Jackson pays rigorous attention to Dickinson's manuscripts and related objects—even reading, at one point, the remains of a cricket the poet had enclosed in a letter—to see how Dickinson's work solicits lyricizing responses. She argues that recent manuscript critics extend the lyric reading that has de-historicized Dickinson and the lyric genre itself, despite their avowed aim to recover Dickinson from the de-historicizing damages of earlier editors, for in the process they cast her writing as a partially lost object in need of recovery. Even as she recognizes the self-perpetuating tendencies of pathetic reading, however, Jackson inserts further ignorance as a key product of her own critical project. As we have seen, a manuscript critic like Martha Nell Smith might argue that the holographs of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" leave us unsure whether this is "a two-stanza poem with four different second stanzas," or "a three-stanza poem" as it was once printed, or "five one-stanza poems." Instead of dismissing the uncertain rhetoric of such questions, Jackson goes still further in the critical production of ignorance, for she asks not how many poems we have, but how we know that what we have are lyric poems at all. Rather than simply demystify "lyric reading," in other words, Jackson shows that historical

interpretation of Dickinson's material possessions puts a limit upon and even antagonizes a different kind of knowledge—the literary knowledge that constitutes a genre such as the lyric. Only by limiting and disavowing historical knowledge, only by involving Dickinson's texts in a circuit of historical loss and impossible recovery, can we know them as lyric poems at all; and conversely, only by dismantling that object of literary knowledge called “Dickinson's lyric poem” can we begin to know her material possessions in their historical actuality. Jackson's study begins to ask how we might respond otherwise to the material artifacts of Dickinson's life, with their specific histories, but she recognizes that such a question renders Dickinson's lyricism as a barred object of knowledge. Like her, I do not know whether such a distancing can displace the lyrical desire to possess Dickinson in so many other ways.

* * *

Possessive responses to Dickinson simultaneously valorize affective reading and signal the importance of the visual encounter with Dickinson's possessions, especially her handwritten papers. Holograph images were published as early as 1903, in Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Henry Walcott Boynton's *A Reader's History of American Literature*, but seeing the poet's manuscripts and related possessions has become especially central to her reception in the past few decades. Since Ralph Franklin's facsimile edition appeared in 1981, improvements in digital publishing technology have made it easier and less expensive to print images of Dickinson's holographs. Scholars can now expect not only to find the facsimile edition in most big libraries, but also to include a few relevant images in their own articles and monographs, thanks largely to digital typesetting and print-on-demand technologies. Meanwhile the growth of the internet since the early 1990s has facilitated electronic dissemination of such images, often for free and in

color.⁴³ The possessive configuration of affect might never have gained traction in Dickinson studies without these technological developments. Far from promising better information or more adequate knowledge of Dickinson's work, however, the emphasis on what Marta Werner calls "the iconic implications of the manuscript" has often enabled pursuits of lyric ignorance, especially by positioning affective response as an alternative to knowledge ("Flights" 305).⁴⁴ Through the encounter with Dickinson's handwriting, affective readings disavow knowledge as the destination of literary interpretation, often preferring a possessive framework that applies as readily to Dickinson's material possessions as to her (and our) affective ones.

The possessions of Dickinson begin with Howe's book, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), which "set Dickinson studies on a whole new footing," as Jerome McGann puts it ("Emily" 57n1). Howe keenly "discerned the radical significance of what Franklin's editorial labors had implicitly revealed," the transformative potential of broader access and closer attention to Dickinson's holographs. Her lyrical verve brings to mind the Hugh Kenner of *The Pound Era* (1973), and few others have matched it. She argues that the common image of Dickinson as socially and intellectually cloistered has unjustly minimized her literary and philosophical influences, as well as her broader significance for intellectual history. Howe's title itself has proved at least as influential as her analysis. She borrows the possessive device from a letter Dickinson sent her Norcross cousins upon reading of the death of George Eliot, whom she greatly admired. Howe cites this excerpt from the letter:

⁴³ Major online archives include the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, presently directed by Martha Nell Smith; *Radical Scatters*, a collection of late fragments edited by Marta Werner; *Emily Dickinson's Correspondences*, edited by Smith and Lara Vetter; and the Boston Public Library's Flickr collection of letters sent to T.W. Higginson. Not all are freely accessible. Indeed, the libraries holding most of the Dickinson manuscripts, at Harvard and Amherst, are themselves exceptionally possessive; as Werner attests, when *Radical Scatters* was ready to go out of print, Harvard would not allow open access to the archive but insisted that its images be strictly licensed ("Woe" 25).

⁴⁴ In a strange formulation, Werner claims that "the flowering of the electronic medium...signifies the very deep desire of our time...for distance...the homelessness to which we accede" ("Woe" 28). I argue the contrary: efforts to make visible Dickinson's material possessions, including Werner's own editions, have been part of a project to recover various senses of contact with, rather than distance from, Dickinson and her work.

The look of the words as they lay in the print I shall never forget. Not their face in the casket could have had the eternity to me. Now, *my* George Eliot. The gift of belief which her greatness denied her, I trust she receives in the childhood of the kingdom of heaven. (L 710)

Dickinson herself thus seems to pre-configure the recent possessive rhetoric. She writes of belief, like affect, in possessive terms—as a gift one receives, or not—and by attributing Eliot’s atheism to her “genius,” Dickinson tempers her own spiritual “trust” with a suggestion that her faith indicates lesser creative “gifts.”⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Dickinson’s affectively intense experience of reading unfolds through a visual encounter with “the look of the words.” These words have a “look” in the sense of an appearance “in the print,” but also of a personified gaze. The slippage between facing words about loss and facing a lost person anticipates the “confusion between the pathos of a subject and the pathos of transmission” that Virginia Jackson traces in lyric readings of Dickinson—analogous versions of the traffic between the *it* and the *who* of possession (*Misery* 13). For Jackson, constructing a lost textual object in need of recovery gives lyric readers a sense of Dickinson’s subjective depth, and for Dickinson the words announcing Eliot’s death bear in their “look” the “eternity” of loss more powerfully than a face in a casket. This personifying rhetoric of textuality has redounded through Dickinson studies, as a “conflation of Dickinson’s physical and textual bodies” (Alfrey 11) that equates Dickinson’s person with “an inviting and vulnerable textual *corpus* upon which power can be, has been, and is now being...deployed” (R. Smith 16). Despite its disciplinary connotations, the treatment of texts as bodies has provided both Dickinson and her readers with a welcome sense of affective contact. In Dickinson’s letter, the transition from words to a person occurs through the phrase, “their face in the casket.” Dickinson may refer “their face” to the words she has just described looking up from the page.

⁴⁵ Gilliland analyzes Dickinson’s religious faith in relation to her poetic production, focusing upon the idea of “uncertain certainty.” He underscores the link between faith and nonknowledge in her thought, citing her avowal, in a letter to Susan, that “Faith is *Doubt*” as evidence of her theological sophistication (qtd. in Gilliland 59n27).

However, the phrase also indicates Eliot's face; "their" can function as a singular epicene pronoun, a nod to the open secret of Eliot's gender. Through this ambivalent pronoun, "the eternity" refers at once to the permanent loss the words announce and to the words' own imperviousness to time, their eternal fixity "in the print." Eternity stands both on the side of Eliot's heaven-bound soul and on that of the printed words that will, like Eliot's writing, live on for us. Just as Auden says upon Yeats's death, "he became his admirers," so upon Eliot's death Dickinson says she is "Now, *my* George Eliot," no longer her own. Already in the letter that inspires Howe's title, Dickinson affiliates possession with an affectively intense readership and with the visual encounter with words on the page, the very commitments that shape recent claims to possess her.

Howe extends her response to Dickinson in an essay, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart," published in 1991 and collected in *The Birth-mark* (1993). Along with *My Emily Dickinson*, it has proved central to a growing body of criticism that privileges visual contact with Dickinson's holographs, but neither work claims that such contact improves our knowledge of Dickinson's texts. Responding to the facsimile edition that had appeared only four years before *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe praises Franklin's carefully researched challenge to the conventional ordering established by Thomas Johnson in 1955. She says Franklin has "made available to readers Dickinson's particular intentions for the order the poems were to be read in" (*My* 24). Others have since questioned Franklin's ordering, often persuasively, but the pursuit of "Dickinson's particular intentions" remains central to such debates. Many still assume that a visual hermeneutics (as opposed to, say, a prosodic approach) must be central to revealing Dickinson's intentions, or else to setting the horizon of their unavailability. Howe tempers her praise of the facsimile by lamenting not only that it "is huge" and "extremely expensive"—fair

enough—but also that “Dickinson’s handwriting is often difficult to decipher” (*My* 35n1). How can the difficulty of the poet’s handwriting count as a shortcoming in a book designed for those who wish to see that very handwriting in all its complexity? Seemingly, visual contact with the holographs “is necessary for a clearer understanding of her writing process,” even if the reader cannot understand the words as Dickinson has written them. In the later essay, Howe provides visual evidence that “the author paid attention to the smallest physical details of the page,” even writing around watermarks instead of over them, and she argues that “these manuscripts should be understood as visual productions,” not necessarily as texts transferrable between media (141-42). Here she rejects Franklin’s belief that the “facsimiles are not to be considered as artistic structures,” but as working transcriptions of poems Dickinson often copied or revised elsewhere. “How can this meticulous editor,” she asks, “repress the physical immediacy of these spiritual improvisations he has brought to light?” The clearest privilege of Dickinson’s holographs in *My Emily Dickinson* appears when Howe opens the second section with an unlabeled holograph of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –,” followed by a typeset version on the verso. Howe’s omission of a caption for the facsimile bespeaks a dedication to the bare encounter with Dickinson’s handwriting. Yet this encounter does not improve our knowledge of the text. Howe says of the holograph, “Each word is deceptively simple, deceptively easy to define. But definition seeing [*sic*] rather than perceiving, hearing and not understanding, is only the shadow of meaning” (*My* 35). Rather than providing a basis for textual knowledge, the manuscripts reveal a “nineteenth century American penchant for linguistic decreation” that is lost as the poems become reified in print. For Howe, seeing Dickinson’s handwriting shows that her work is far less orderly and stable than the print editions imply and that this linguistic destabilization was central to her poetics. The insight we gain from Dickinson’s holographs, then, is that her texts

are *less* available to a knowing critical gaze than we might like to suppose. We are left with visual impressions of the “spiritual improvisations” traced in Dickinson’s hand, and the desire to recover the “physical immediacy” of her writing has done much to align claims of visual and affective contact with her.

Howe does not impute possessiveness to Dickinson herself—quite the contrary.⁴⁶ She resists the traditional view of Dickinson as guarded and introverted, and this yields a novel idea:

The decision not to publish her poems in her lifetime, to close up an extraordinary amount of work, is astonishing. Far from being the misguided modesty of an oppressed female ego, it is a consummate Calvinist gesture of self-assertion by a poet with faith to fling election loose across the incandescent shadows of futurity. (*My* 49)

Through a faithful openness to futurity, Dickinson did not pursue publication but made little effort to prevent it.⁴⁷ Elsewhere Howe associates this easy openness with poetry in general:

“Poetry is the great stimulation to life. Poetry leads past possession of self to transfiguration beyond gender” (*My* 138). Here she jabs at feminist critics who frame Dickinson too strictly in gendered terms, submerging her transcendence.⁴⁸ Where, then, does possession operate in Howe’s account? It emerges in the transition between writing and reading. “My voice formed from my life belongs to no one else. What I put into words is no longer my possession” (*My* 13). When Howe imagines herself in the position of poetic production, her voice “belongs to no one else,” but once “put into words” and publicized, the text “is no longer my possession.” From the standpoint of readership, then, Howe responds possessively to those who see Dickinson as a neurotic recluse, weaving webs of verse: “Who is this Spider-Artist? Not *my* Emily Dickinson.

⁴⁶ Dickinson is apprehensive about possession and its trappings: “I am afraid to own a Body – / I am afraid to own a Soul – / Profound – precarious Property – / Possession, not optional –” (F 1050).

⁴⁷ Anne-Lise François reads Dickinson’s openness to futurity as a “release from obligation, recreation, license, opportunity,” though she does not link it to Howe’s speculations on the poet’s attitude about publication (171). Cf. François 170-79.

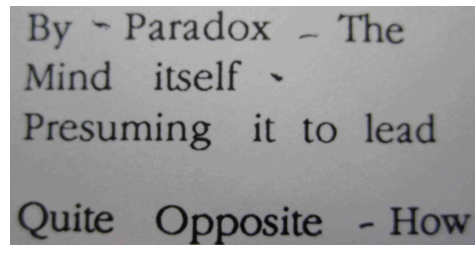
⁴⁸ The primary avatar of the feminist reading Howe resists is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

This is poetry not life, and certainly not sewing” (*My* 14). Dickinson’s poetry is “not life” in part because Dickinson is dead. Just as George Eliot’s death occasions Dickinson’s claim of possession, so does Howe fashion her Emily Dickinson from a body of verbal remains the poet can no longer claim as hers. Dickinson’s affective and material possessions are remaindered to her readers, the object of an always incomplete recovery by which critics have found so many ways to not-know her lyric writing.

Howe’s idea of the Dickinson holographs as visual fields aligns neatly with her own creative works, which often involve visual play with the layout of words on the page.⁴⁹ In fact Howe makes use of such techniques in her critical discourse on Dickinson as well. The holograph images she provides in “These Flames and Generosities of the Heart” are more detailed than those in most criticism, often showing only a single word, and the later pages of *My Emily Dickinson* include a strange diagram of Howe’s design, intended to trace the “process of Metamorphosis” in the final stanza of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” (130). In the later essay she provides typeset versions that not only retain the line breaks in the holographs but also, unlike any others I have seen, reproduce the relative length, thickness, and angle of the dashes and errant penstrokes.⁵⁰ This technique ratifies the visual effects of Dickinson’s handwritten dash as significant even in typeset versions:

⁴⁹ This penchant for visual play on the space of the page extends from Howe’s earliest publications to her most recent. Particularly notable are her *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), *Frame Structures: Early Poems, 1974-1979* (1996), *Singularities* (1990), and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007). Despite these visual similarities, Albert Gelpi argues that Susan Howe’s sister, Fanny, in fact provides the better contemporary analogue to Dickinson’s antinomianism and her expressive lyricism.

⁵⁰ Crumbley’s study comes closest to matching Howe’s visual attentiveness to punctuation. Its dashes vary in length, elevation, and angle to mimic Dickinson’s handwritten versions, but they still have the straightness and uniformity of typeset print. His opening note on representing the holographs in print claims the variable dashes represent distinct “categories of holograph marks,” whereas Howe and others would argue that no such categories organize the handwritten dashes.



By ~ Paradox ~ The
Mind itself ~
Presuming it to lead
Quite Opposite ~ How

(*Flames* 136)

I remain uncertain what such techniques accomplish that holograph images could not, but uncertainty may be precisely the point. Like the poems themselves, the visual effects of Howe's criticism provide a "deflagration of what was there to say. No message to decode or finally decide...they checkmate inscription to become what a reader offers them" (*Flames* 136). The visual play of Howe's Dickinson seems less intent upon producing critical knowledge than revealing the limitations of an approach primarily concerned with knowing. In the essay she provides a series of one-sentence paragraphs, as a set of competing axioms:

Emily Dickinson almost never titled a poem.
She titled poems several times.
She drew an ink slash at the end of a poem.
Sometimes she didn't. (143)

These statements contrast habits with their exceptions, all true yet glaringly contradictory, and they visually insinuate themselves as verse, without breaking the formal conventions of critical prose. They thus perform a generic conundrum of Dickinson studies, echoing the way that Dickinson's "Poems will be called letters and letters will be called poems" (140). According to Howe, the editors often elide such generic uncertainty and its implications. The visual encounter with Dickinson's handwriting bears the promise of closer contact with her work, but it ultimately underscores and sharpens uncertainties instead of yielding clearer knowledge. Through the visual play of her critical writing, Howe performs some of the uncertainties to which this visual encounter leads.

In her article on “My Digital Dickinson,” Lori Emerson argues for the importance of reading and writing technologies for Dickinson’s reception. Like Howe, she ultimately appeals to visual contact with the holographs as supporting ignorance about the poems. Emerson views Dickinson’s compositional equipment—various stationery, small scraps, string bindings, sheets pinned together—as part of an effort to “denaturalize the writing media by experimenting with ways to disrupt a tendency to see through the writing surface” (61). Emerson draws such equipment to our attention, critiquing the fantasy of unmediated or “interface-free” contact with the expressive substance of the poet’s work. When the textual interface seems to disappear, she argues, we should ask “just whose intuition is driving this interface-free interface” and how it still shapes and constrains our reading and writing (59). Attention to textual equipment reveals that “our reading of bookbound poets is already framed by the digital,” and in the same way “it is not possible to have access to a pure reading of Dickinson’s poems, one that is unmediated by either twentieth- or twenty-first-century interfaces” (56, 58). Nonetheless, Emerson’s appeal to medium-specificity views certain textual equipment as more pure. She faces some difficulty insisting that “Dickinson’s handwriting...is untranslatable into any other medium” without appearing to idealize the handwriting as an originary trace of poetic expression (64). Indeed, she does not discuss the manuscripts as one among many renditions of Dickinson’s work, equally but differently conditioning our interface with it; she instead appeals to them as offering a superior basis for critical thought. In a project aimed at challenging the naturalness or obviousness of all textual equipment, this privilege of the manuscripts goes largely unnoticed, however, because Emerson follows Howe in appealing to the manuscripts not as a better source of knowledge but as a better source of ignorance. She discusses the manuscript of “We met as Sparks —,” whose final lines Dickinson wrote on a slip of paper she then pinned to the rest of the poem. Emerson

rightly notes that neither books nor computers can satisfactorily reproduce such a palimpsest, but examining the original does not therefore provide better textual understanding. Revealing the text's originary indeterminacy, its literal tendency to slip all over itself, attention to "the pinning makes impossible any reading of the poem as complete" (63). By addressing the poem not as a transferrable text but as an object with a material history, we risk losing track of the very object we had hoped to understand. As in Howe's work, contact with the manuscripts helps Emerson to see the texts as constitutively unstable and thus to view our relation to them as necessarily shaped by ignorance and uncertainty, rather than critical insight and knowledge. These accounts thus imagine a new textual sublimity based not on the properties of language but on the ineffability of the visual, replacing the heresy of paraphrase with the heresy of print.

Though she does not link this tendency with ignorance as I do, Virginia Jackson argues persuasively in *Dickinson's Misery* that recent manuscript-oriented criticism contributes to a long tradition of rendering Dickinson's texts as lyric poems, by framing them as lost objects. For Jackson, "recent editorial and critical attempts to undo earlier print representations of Dickinson's manuscripts have reinscribed Dickinson's lyricism in every torn corner and watermark of her pages" (53). Indeed, more than a few critics have celebrated how Dickinson's scraps and pinned fragments "fly outside the codex book to the lyric's many ends" (Werner, "Woe" 27). Casting such details as the lyrical textures of objects with which we have lost contact, critics set forth the task of recovering her writing as lyric poetry, imbued with the pathos of this loss and recovery. "Dickinson's 'items,'" what I call her possessions, "have been successively and carefully framed to give the impression that something, or someone, is missing" (Jackson, *Misery* 3). The recovery of Dickinson's possessions as objects of critical attachment—never quite complete, always somehow mediated—stands in for a recovery of Dickinson's

affective depth. Applying at once to material objects and affective intensities, the rhetoric of possession facilitates this lyrical slide from one project of recovery to another, from the *it* of the lost manuscript to the *who* of the lost poet. Though seemingly dedicated to the material history of Dickinson's compositional equipment, manuscript-oriented criticism in fact can be indifferent to the particular technological forms of our interface with Dickinson. As Jackson puts it, "the media of Dickinson's publication will not change the message" (52). For as long as these media enable critical narratives of loss and partial recovery, of incomplete possession and impossible knowledge, the lyric remains Dickinson's generic destination and the pathos of loss her overriding affective texture.

As we have seen, even for Dickinson herself an affectively charged encounter with "the look of the words" occasions a claim of possession like those so often made upon her in recent years. For many critics who emphasize visual contact with Dickinson's manuscripts and related possessions, this encounter does not improve our knowledge of the poet or her work; it occasions an ignorant response, a narrative of critical knowledge destabilized and lost. Whereas a typical, typeset edition of the poems "regularly elides Dickinson's irregularities" (McGann, "Emily" 41) by forcing them into conventional forms, encountering the expressive disorder of her holographs leaves us *less* certain what is a poem and what a letter, what a dash and what a slip of the wrist, where one poem ends and another begins. However, by supporting possessive claims of affective contact with the poet, this narrative of lost knowledge in fact strengthens the status of her writings as lyric poems, for that genre itself has been defined in terms of the very ignorance and the pathos of recovered loss that manuscript-oriented critics so often pursue.

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Dickinson's writing casts affect as weak ignorance, distinct from knowledge but still able to sustain social contact and claims of certainty, and her readers have ratified this idea by continuing to link it with the affective and material senses of possession that have shaped her reception. Few contemporary texts exemplify these exchanges among affect, ignorance, and possession as vividly as the case of Philip Gura. A professor of American literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gura is also an amateur collector of antique photographs. In April 2000, while browsing albumen prints on eBay, he stumbled upon an advertisement for a "Vintage Emily Dickinson Albumen Photo." If authentic, such an image would be only the second known photograph of the poet after childhood, a potentially priceless find.⁵¹ Gura soon came to believe the image might be genuine, and he outbid one other collector, obtaining it for \$481—a pittance, if it proved authentic. He tells the story of finding, purchasing, and attempting to authenticate the photograph in "How I Met and Dated Miss Emily Dickinson," his 2004 article for the American Antiquarian Society journal, *Common-place*. Of course, the "Dated" in his title refers to his efforts to date the photograph historically, and "Met" can be read as a synonym for finding the picture. But especially with the feminizing, sexualizing "Miss" before the poet's name, Gura invites us to understand his story as a romantic liaison—began online, like so many these days. Indeed, the article focuses on Gura's affective experience of the affair, rather than what he or we can learn from it, and his narrative relies as heavily upon ideas of possession and ignorance as any Dickinson poem does. In the opening paragraph, he boasts not of finding an important relic but of having "experienced what it really meant to possess, and

⁵¹ Martha Nell Smith claims to have discovered and authenticated a new photograph of Emily Dickinson at age 29. She has presented her findings in a recent talk, "Deep Gossip, Deep Reading in Digital Dickinson," at the C19 Conference 2012, in Berkeley, CA. Although a lively critical discussion will soon develop around this photograph, I am interested primarily in the possessive rhetoric of affective ignorance that has shaped the discourse about Emily Dickinson, so the outcome of attempts to verify the new photograph may not matter so much as the attendant language of affective contact and epistemic uncertainty.

be possessed by, a picture that may show Emily Dickinson at the height of her creative powers.” The conditionality of this “may show” has motivated every effort to authenticate the photograph, none successful, but it is dwarfed by the more forceful language surrounding it: “what it really meant,” “to possess,” “be possessed,” “creative powers.” These weightier formulations guide Gura’s reminiscence. Like many of Dickinson’s readers, and like the poet herself, Gura understands affective intensity in terms of possession—indeed, as a form of capture so intense that it upsets the difference between possessing something and being possessed by it, between the *who* and the *it* of affective contact. He likewise imagines affect as a mode of thought distinct from knowledge, but one that nonetheless enjoys a privileged relation to meaning. Just as Dickinson responds to Susan’s frosty praise by choosing to “*suppose – it means,*” so for Gura “what it really meant” to discover this photograph refers not to any matter of fact but to an affective response distinguished from rational knowing.

By framing his article in terms of his affective experience with the photograph, Gura brackets the troubling question of its authenticity. In this way, his discourse of feeling operates as an ignorance strategy, insinuating that we do not, cannot, and need not know whether the print in fact portrays Dickinson. As it turns out, most interested parties now believe it does not. The most persuasive case against the image’s authenticity was made by George Gleason, who investigated the photo at the request of the Emily Dickinson International Society. His report, published in 2009 in the *Emily Dickinson Journal* as an article, “Is It Really Emily Dickinson?” provides a circumspect assessment and puts its conclusion bluntly: “the image is not of Emily Dickinson” (3).⁵² The report appeared some years after Gura’s own article, but already when

⁵² Prior to the Gura affair, the most notable exchange of false Dickinsoniana had been Sotheby’s 1996 sale of a counterfeit Dickinson manuscript to the Jones Library in Amherst, for \$24,150. See Mitchell and Hart. Ironically enough, the counterfeit poem, produced by the forger Mark Hoffman, is all about ignorance: “That God cannot / be understood / Everyone Agrees – / We do not know / His motives nor / Comprehend his / Deeds – // Then why

Gura published his account, the task of authentication had become “an albatross around my neck.” He describes the frustration of learning “how skeptical many scholars were that my picture could be genuine” and of difficulty finding a forensic examiner to study the image. At last one examiner notes some physiological similarities between Gura’s photo and the preexisting Daguerreotype of her, concluding that the new image “could not be excluded” as of Dickinson. This is faint praise. Gura goes on to describe his excitement about the publicity his photograph received, noting that *New Yorker* editor David Remnick “pounced” at the chance to break the story and that “national publicity” followed in a variety of media.⁵³ Because of the publicity, Gura received “many unsolicited emails in which people...often confessed their various passions, scholarly and otherwise, for Dickinson.” Again, the publicity does not produce knowledge but facilitates affective exchange. Those writing Gura did sometimes request “more information,” but he remained short on facts to share. The photograph does not help people learn much about Dickinson, nor does the public seem able to help Gura learn more about the photograph. Instead, the publicity helps Gura share his own impassioned “possession” of Dickinson, through the photograph, and to share this affective attachment with others who have “passions”—intellectual, aesthetic, erotic—for her.

Gura’s article closes with a defense of the ignorant stance that makes affect his primary avenue for relating to his photograph. In 2009 he sent a correction to *Common-place*, in anticipation of Gleason’s report. There he acknowledges that his collaborator, Alfred Habegger, is not so credulous as he, and he admits that “until further evidence surfaces, [Habegger’s] position is the most sensible to assume.” The final words of his article, however, make a deft end-run around such measured skepticism. He praises a newspaper article that avows, “no one

should I / Seek solace in / What I cannot / Know? / Better to play / In winter’s sun / Than to fear the / Snow” (Mitchell 39-40).

⁵³ The *New Yorker* article, by Rebecca Mead, appeared on 22 May 2000.

can say for sure” whether the photograph is of Dickinson. On the basis of such uncertainty, Gura’s closing paragraph privileges his affective relation to the image, as a refuge both from uncertainties about it and from the danger of knowing it is not genuine:

This [uncertainty] expressly captures how I think about this photograph. I know it is she, even if I cannot yet absolutely prove it. If the image proves genuine beyond a doubt, I realize that I will have to find a home for it in some institution, for it then would belong in a new way to all people who love Dickinson’s poetry. Right now, however, I can look at this image every day and thus perhaps get as “close” to this elusive woman as anyone can. It is a delightful feeling.

Uncertainty captures how he thinks, rather than what he knows. Affective thinking, by virtue of its distinctness from knowledge, provides an alternative basis for claims of certainty. Absent any real evidence, Gura can still “know it is she,” though not in the sense of proving the photograph “genuine beyond a doubt.” Knowledge of some uncritical sort remains ignorance’s destination, the unreachable end of a possessive desire. If actual evidence appeared, he would feel obligated to surrender the photograph, and his privileged affective possession of it, to “some institution” incapable of such intense feeling. Until then, his certainty is authorized by the same “delightful feeling” it helps to sustain, keeping him as affectively “close” to Dickinson as anyone could wish to be. Gura at once avows emotional certainty about the object and disavows any evidentiary logic that would either devalue the image as fake or confirm its authenticity and thus dispossess him. Possession of the photograph helps Gura understand visual contact with Dickinson’s image as a form of affective contact with the poet herself, and this visual pursuit of affective proximity relies explicitly upon an ignorant stance in relation to the object.

Just as Gura sees and even “dates” Dickinson without really seeing her at all, the visible invisibility of her many mutilated letters and manuscripts has organized her availability to identity-political appropriations. Through the many excisions and erasures of her writing, her significance for contemporary feminist and queer readings has become closely bound to the

discourse of affective ignorance. With stunning regularity, the mutilations of Dickinson's writing seem to efface expressions of love for her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson. For this reason, Martha Nell Smith, the critic who has most closely attended these mutilations, avers that "the omissions are more than accidents" ("Omissions"). Instead, these erasures and excisions "track the path of an early editor suppressing evidence of Emily Dickinson's intense engagement with her primary audience, the woman to whom she sent more writings than she did to any other." Like Ralph Franklin and others, Smith believes most of the mutilations were made by Mabel Loomis Todd, early Dickinson editor and mistress of Susan's husband, Austin Dickinson. Perhaps Todd resented her lover's wife enough to expunge her from this literary corpus, or perhaps she intended to protect Emily and Susan from suspicions that they were a bit *too* intimate. We cannot know her intentions, nor even be sure that most of the mutilations are hers.

The critical engagement with Dickinson's mutilated, lost, or damaged texts unfolds through just such claims to know and yet not to know, to see and not to see. As Smith puts it in her first book, the erased words "call out to us though we cannot quite see them" (*Rowing* 32). Yet if we cannot see them, what are we reading when we read Dickinson's mutilated texts? Smith avers, "It's difficult, most difficult, to photograph absence," but her electronic collection of the damaged documents, *Mutilations*, does just that. The collection and Smith's commentary thereby show that the texts matter because we often can, after all, see not only the traces of damage but also the words such damage had threatened to erase. For instance, the fascicle transcription of "One sister have I in the house" (F 5) was scribbled over in heavy ink pen, likely an attempt to hide this poem's declaration of affection for Susan. But another copy of the poem, undamaged, was found in the correspondence, and anyway one can discern most of Dickinson's words beneath the scribbling on the fascicle. Smith displays the mutilated pages in her digital

collection, providing no transcription, but the poem's full text appears in Franklin's edition. (Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Susan's daughter, would offer "One sister" as a dedicatory poem at the front of her edition, *The Single Hound* [1914], as though vindicating her mother.) In fact, it is only by virtue of the text's legibility, its persistent visibility under erasure, that we can perceive ~~the affection for Susan~~ it expresses; a true erasure could not be read as an attack upon that very affection, since we could not read through to the object of its occlusion. Only as *not* erased, as still legible, do the mutilated texts become legible as erased or damaged traces of emotional contact between the two women. We may heed Smith's pathos-laden call to "imagine scars on the body of Dickinson's writings," but we produce this narrative of loss and injury only by reading as lost, as injured, those texts that remain minimally available to our reading ("Omissions").⁵⁴

This structure of visible invisibility, of recovered loss, shapes the discussion of a possible lesbian relationship between Emily and Susan.⁵⁵ Throughout her career, Smith has shown that the importance and intensity of the two women's relationship has been suppressed in favor of seeing Emily Dickinson as an isolated genius. Smith does not, however, definitively claim that the two had sex, nor even that erotic desire primarily structured their relationship: "More interesting to me than the suppression of the erotic is the suppression of evidence of mental, compatriot intellect between two women" ("Omissions"). Indeed, attempts to inscribe the relationship between Emily and Susan within a distinctly lesbian framework might be seen as

⁵⁴ Within visual archives such as Smith's, the alternative to such pathos might be a refusal to launch the familiar critique of exposure and unveiling, in order instead to imagine anti-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal ways of seeing. Sharon Marcus indicates the need for such a feminist reconceptualization of the gaze in *Between Women*: "That an active pleasure in looking *at women* could be a requisite element of heterosexual femininity has been a logical impossibility for a theory that declares active spectatorship and desire to be masculine and limits women to passive identification with the feminine image or active identification with the male gaze" (112).

⁵⁵ The earliest statement on Dickinson's lesbianism may be Rebecca Patterson's, in 1951. For more recent commentary on Dickinson's sexual orientation, see Martha Nell Smith, Paula Bennett, Faderman, Farr, Hart, Henneberg, Messmer, and Pollak.

strategies to displace or occlude the greater scandal of two women thinking together. If Smith admits that the “erasures are at least in part discourses of desire,” we still do not know whether these discourses originally described an outright sexual exchange or whether this desire is our own, its discourse tracing a readerly need to see the two women in this light. In important but largely implicit ways, the debate about Susan and Emily has not clarified their relationship so much as it has produced ignorance, yielding a more keenly felt and clearly articulated inability to know precisely how the two interacted.

We are often reminded that women of Dickinson’s era enjoyed affectively intense contact with other women without necessarily viewing these relationships as romantic or sexual. Fair enough, but efforts to understand Emily and Susan’s relationship run aground on an even more basic difficulty. Sharon Marcus describes this difficulty at the outset of *Between Women* (2007), her study of female homosociality in Victorian England, where she makes this “fundamental but curiously overlooked point: even within a single class or generation, there were many different kinds of relationships between women” (2). Marcus’s title echoes Eve Sedgwick’s influential *Between Men* (1985), and the quotation above recalls a prominent lesson of a subsequent Sedgwick book, the first “Axiom” found in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990): “People are different from each other” (22). That is, even if typical relationships between women worked differently in Dickinson’s society than in our own, this fact does little to clarify Emily’s particular relationship with Susan, which might have been more or less typical for the time. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick goes on to argue that since the latter half of the nineteenth century, a wide variety of gay identity formations have relied upon such rhetoric of ignorance about homosexual acts and desires. Even as it marks the inscrutability of Emily’s relationship with Susan, this same ignorance may be said to inscribe that relationship within a

queer social epistemology, precisely by virtue of the complex rhetoric of ignorance and uncertainty that has grown up around this question.

Of course, the blockage of affective knowledge appears also in contexts where feminine or non-normative sexualities are not directly at issue. We are equally helpless to identify the Dark Lady or the Fair Youth of Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance. The material record of texts cannot provide assured knowledge of a writer's affective life, but only a site for the encounter with affective ignorance. We can never surely say what affective fractures, what intimate distances and long-range attachments, may have shaped a life as it was lived, nor can we expect any written record to tell us where queer desire might emerge, where a thought or act of love might have made its unrecorded claim. Still, the rhetoric of ignorance enables the management of female and non-normative sexual identities with much greater intensity than male or heterosexual identities. There is a long tradition of imputing ignorance to women, especially women with artistic ambitions. And because a particular affective sensitivity is often attributed to women, the theory of affect as a mode of ignorance enables a misogynistic encoding by which women's affective acuity implies that they are less rational, less disposed to knowledge and more passively at the mercy of their own emotional conditions. If the possessive readings of Dickinson have, as Howe intends, provided a more social alternative to the feminist recuperation of her as a paragon of cloistered genius, then we still do not know what a reading of Dickinson's gender would look like without this double-bind of isolation or affective ignorance.

The rhetoric of ignorance informs discussions of Dickinson's sexual orientation with still greater intensity, and it thereby shapes her significance for current political thought. That we should *not know* whether Emily and Susan had sex, whether they considered themselves lovers or just beloved sisters, has proved as decisive in making them available to queer reading as any

definitive record of identities and acts could do. Yes, a lack of evidence makes it impossible to know the nature of their relationship, and historical distance frustrates current understanding of how female-female attachments worked in Dickinson's culture.⁵⁶ But because the rhetoric of ignorance remains central to contemporary feminist and queer politics, these and other failures to know about Dickinson's affective life in fact make her more available for present-day appropriation. Sedgwick's work reminds us that the rhetoric of ignorance has become woven into the very fabric from which contemporary queer identities are cut. Although the politics of not-knowing has developed primarily in relation to a set of specifically non-normative sexual identities, I would say of Dickinson's current political meanings what Sedgwick says of her own queer epistemology: "A point of the book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable" (*Epistemology* 12). The end of this chapter returns to Holmes and Magee, examining the political appropriations of Dickinson in their work, and it explores how the idea of affective ignorance, which owes its structure and critical force to queer identity politics, has taken on an indefinitely broader significance for contemporary culture.

* * *

Michael Magee's *My Angie Dickinson* and Janet Holmes's *The ms of m y kin* show that the possessions of Dickinson have informed her significance for current political thought. As the possessive language of their titles suggest, both books employ appropriative techniques, taking control of Dickinson's words and forms in order to produce new poems. Magee exemplifies the young genre called flarf, which commonly understands poetry's political significance in affective terms and which often explores the aesthetic effects of ignorance. As we have seen, such claims

⁵⁶ By tracking the difference between homoeroticism and homosexuality, Marcus argues that homoeroticism in the Victorian era was neither suppressed nor opposed to heterosexuality: "because Victorians did not define lesbianism as an autonomous category, they were not concerned that female homoeroticism might lead women to disclaim sexual relationships with men" (166). Such unfamiliar relational categories suggest that whether Emily and Susan idly eroticized each other or had sex, the nature of their relationship might remain illegible to current readers.

on behalf of affect and ignorance help to mediate between individuals and their social worlds. Holmes, meanwhile, contributes to the longstanding tradition of “erasure poetry.”⁵⁷ She erases poems Dickinson wrote in 1861-62, which as Holmes notes were “the first years of the United States Civil War.” The resulting spare, often mournful poems about recent US wars in the Middle East question Dickinson’s supposed parochialism by exploring the relations between personal feeling and public policy. By extending the possessive response to Dickinson, both books indicate how rhetoric about affect and ignorance shape contemporary political discourse.

The flarf movement began in 2001 as an in-joke among a small group of poets on an email listserv. *My Angie Dickinson*, like most flarf poetry, was produced through a technique called “Google sculpting.” The poet searches the internet for certain phrases—in Magee’s case, “Angie Dickinson” and selected words from Dickinson’s poetry—and then culls language from the search results to “sculpt” a poem. The technique’s political tendencies have been hotly contested. On one hand, its appropriative impulse and resistance to conventional notions of poetic expression recall familiar claims of political subversion made on behalf of Language writing, OuLiPo, and other experimental schools.⁵⁸ On the other, when Gary Sullivan casts flarf as a way of “collaborating with the culture via the Web,” he is not alone in suggesting that it is less a form of resistance and more a reproduction of dominant cultural tropes. Flarf’s ambiguous status as quietist collaboration or trenchant critique is evident in Magee’s poetry itself:

If someone who has been—trained—
threw Caution—to the “wind”

⁵⁷ The most notable exemplars of writing by erasure may be Tom Phillips’s *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970) and Ronald Johnson’s *Radi Os* (1977), a strategic erasure of *Paradise Lost*.

⁵⁸ In “Sincerity and the Second Person,” Jennifer Ashton refutes this reading of flarf’s collage techniques as anti-expressive and thus socio-politically subversive. She instead views flarf as a return to “a familiar Romantic lyric ideal” of the poem as overheard soliloquy, not directed address, though the expressive intimacies thus achieved are slight reconfigurations of the romantic trope: “in replacing the person with a mechanical agent,” Google sculpting might not put us in the presence of a sincere expressive “I,” but it does provide “a means of eliminating the possibility of insincerity” (104-5).

and decided to—whisper—sweet
 nothings in my ear—
 what with my Angie Dickinson
 flip and all—well... (001)

Shopworn phrases like “throw caution to the wind” and “whisper sweet nothings” make this poem feel “trained” and determined by the idiom it collages. The speaker’s openness to seduction, borne out by the ellipsis, connotes passive acquiescence rather than resistance. Other aspects of the poem seem “flip,” even satirical. Dickinson’s techniques become a target of some mockery, as capitalization and dashes break up canned phrases, apparently for the sole purpose of making this look like a Dickinson poem. Such visual mimicry contrasts amusingly with an idiom conspicuously drawn from our time, rather than Dickinson’s, but at first there appears little evidence that Magee intends anything more than mild amusement with this work.

Holmes’s method in *The ms of m y kin*, by contrast, has more immediately political significance. By erasing poems Dickinson wrote during the Civil War, Holmes reminds readers that despite Dickinson’s reputation her poems often engage with the social and political happenings of her day, a claim that can be traced to Howe’s work in the 1980s. Magee’s book performs a slippage between normally separate discursive spaces—between internet chatter and Dickinson’s verse—but Holmes pursues a temporal rather than a spatial form of slippage. Through the reductive ventriloquy of erasure, her poems address current US wars in the Middle East, especially the war in Iraq, and a “Note” at the end of the book ensures that the reader makes the proper connections: “People and events referenced in the poems, and occasional speakers of the poems, include those piloting aircraft on 9/11; U.S. President George W. Bush; Osama bin Laden...” and so forth. What can it mean to claim that George W. Bush is referenced in or is the speaker of a poem produced by erasing the words of Emily Dickinson? Even allowing that Dickinson cannot have actually written about Bush or the war in Iraq, such a provocative

conceit again underscores the notion that Dickinson, despite her reputation as an isolated genius, at least provided enough raw material in her poems that an alternative poetry of war, invasion, and political turmoil could be rendered from her work. As Holmes produces this rendition, in fact, some of the material she removes would have referred us to Dickinson's actual historical context, that of an increasingly violent Civil War. This short poem by Holmes, for example, refers the reader to contemporary geopolitics as blatantly as any in the book:

It matters

that the oil
is gone. (1861.12 [247])⁵⁹

With surprising deftness, Holmes distills from Dickinson a poetry about such contemporary concerns as the West's thirst for oil, but in this case the material she erases is still more striking. To make this poem Holmes begins with Dickinson's "The Lamp burns sure – within –" (F 247), a short poem about a person's inner flame. The first of its two stanzas describes how "Serfs – supply the Oil" for this metaphorical lamp, but in the second stanza Dickinson alters her vocabulary, describing how "The Slave – forgets – to fill – / The Lamp" and, at last, how "the Slave – is gone." For Dickinson's purposes the Slave is a metaphorical conceit, but in 1861 that word would have carried salient political connotations as well. Hence, Holmes transforms a Civil War-era poem by Dickinson into a poem about current geopolitics by removing its reference to the political tensions of Dickinson's day. In one gesture of erasure, she underscores both the relevance of Dickinson's poetry to the political events of the 1860s and demonstrates her availability for appropriation as a means to comment on current political situations.

⁵⁹ Holmes numbers poems by the year in which Dickinson composed them—either 1861 or 1862—followed by an ordinal for their place in her book and then, in parentheses, Franklin's number for the source poem by Dickinson.

Holmes's erasure of this poem also elides the metaphor of the inner flame, and this change too is characteristic of *The ms of m y kin*. Although the book often seems mournful about recent political events, it also is less frequently organized around first-person expressive discourse than Dickinson's poems. Holmes prefers an analytic tone of world-historical observation and commentary, interspersed with often piquant individualism. For instance, she writes not of deceased friends, as Dickinson did, but of "such and such // in the Spulchre – // on such a / date" (1862.22 [354-359]), suggesting with the repeated "such" that we read wartime deaths as statistics, without the affective weight of personal loss. Holmes's erasures are at once melancholic about contemporary politics and analytic. While Magee replaces Dickinson's expressive outbursts with his own, more absurdist ones, Holmes displaces such personal notes in favor of an observational tone suggestive of social criticism and historical critique.

Flarf such as *My Angie Dickinson* often explores the aesthetic effects of performing ignorance, stupidity, or vapidness, and the political disposition of this strategy remains debatable. Flarfist K. Silem Mohammad describes the genre as "deliberate shapelessness of content, form, spelling, and thought...often with the intention of achieving a studied blend of the offensive, the sentimental, and the infantile" (Bernstein). *My Angie Dickinson* contains several references to this aesthetic of ignorance, when "superior intellect—softens—" (007). Flarf often presents itself as a vulgar pastiche of popular culture, a kind of "Sodom and Gamorrah dub [*sic*]" of "Leslie Nielsen, / Urinal voyeur" and similarly lewd images (017, 022). Instead of responding critically to popular ignorance and vulgarity, then, flarf adopts an ignorance strategy of its own, mocking and miming the unsavory products of public culture. Magee has described this ignorance strategy as a political response. Expressing nostalgia for the "devious" machinations of Nixon and his collaborators, he avers that by comparison

George W. Bush is an utter dumbfucking fool achieving the same effect...I feel compelled in the face of this to interrogate dumbness, ridiculousness, stupidity; to work undercover in the middle of it, to pretend to be it if necessary, all the while reporting back to the reader. I have in mind, always now, Frederick Douglass's words, 'At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument is needed' (1852). (Bernstein)

Emily Dickinson may have agreed with her contemporary in this regard. In 1852 she writes a valentine to William Howland: "Harrah for Peter Parley! / Hurrah for Daniel Boon! / Three cheers, sir, for the gentleman / Who first observed the moon!" (F 2). The poem's later lines contain somber ruminations on the dead at Bunker Hill, but the irreverent Magee would not have us forget Dickinson's own ironic hurrahs. If *My Angie Dickinson* suggests, in its closest approach to mentioning Dickinson, that "The Puritan strain rides underneath" both Dickinson's and Magee's comedy, then perhaps this strain motivates a more serious attitude toward satire's socio-political effects. Holmes of course shares Magee's negative judgment about George W. Bush's intelligence, but instead of joining Magee in his perverse nostalgia for more intelligent villains, she reasserts an earnestly critical objection: "This World // baffles – // Men / of // Faith slip – and / see / Evidence – // in / lies – // their // Reward for this – // Empire" (1862.27 [373-375]). For his part, Magee makes strong claims for the political powers of tongue-in-cheek ignorance, arguing that he can go "undercover" and mime the stupidities of public culture in order to undercut its authority. The ignorance involved is weak, in the sense that Magee merely assumes it as a kind of drag, planning always to recover and "report back" to sympathetic readers. But as the slipperiness of such rhetoric should remind us, one can rarely arbitrate between earnest and pantomimed ignorance.

The most visible attack upon the politics of flarf is Dan Hoy's article, "The Virtual Dependency of the Post-Avant and the Problematics of Flarf: What Happens when Poets Spend Too Much Time Fucking Around on the Internet." Hoy argues that Google search results should

not stand for a democratized idea of “the culture,” since Google’s profit motive leads to the suppression of some Web sites and the privileging of others: “Google is not a spontaneous manifestation of the zeitgeist in the virtual realm.” Hoy may be right that flarf poets’ celebration of Google as a textual leveler betrays a “lack of rigor in their process” and a failure to consider the politically compromised technologies and discourses that enable their own writing. However, to accuse the flarf poets of “uncritical” methods is to miss the mark, since the poets themselves make a show of ignorance and stupidity. An effective critique of flarf would need to take seriously the political stakes of such willfully uncritical performances.⁶⁰

Both Holmes’s book and Magee’s explore the uncertain differences between interventionist critical response to a political situation and, on the other hand, ideas that emerge from within a given political situation itself. Flarf often does not critically distance itself from the world upon which it would intervene. It might present itself as symptomatic or as a sharpening of ideological contradictions, or it might indeed perpetuate the problems Hoy believes it aims to critique. Magee’s appropriative use of jargon, especially slang related to state authority, bears out this ambivalence: “Spook, spook, spook / *Our* Intelligence / Sentences— put together— / Spook them so— they flee—” (136). The “spook” may be a shadowy government agent; if government intelligence programs operate “for the people,” then their product should be “*Our* Intelligence,” not state secrets and public ignorance. They should offer “sentences” in the verbal sense, not the carceral. If only we could “Spook” the spooks “so they flee,” we might escape this paranoiac middle-ground. As Rick Snyder points out, “many works of Flarf can only be read within the

⁶⁰ Hoy does not recognize that the political interest of pastiche as such lies precisely in the ambivalence and undecidability of its speech in relation to “genuine” political discourse. Fredric Jameson provides the authoritative account of pastiche’s deflationary effects upon political discourse in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Though he is highly critical of pastiche as a symptom of the post-political, his account at least helps us to recognize flarf as a signally postmodern phenomenon and not, as Ashton claims, contiguous with the poets of the “new sincerity” or with a romanticist theory of expression (Ashton, “Sincerity”; Jameson 16-25).

context of the wars perpetrated by the U.S. following 9/11”—and also, perhaps, of increasingly intense state surveillance programs. Holmes, meanwhile, shows that the same might be said of Dickinson’s poetry itself, inasmuch as its selective erasure can be understood to excavate a commentary on the current political situation that always lay dormant in the original poems. In her blurb for the back cover of Holmes’s book, Susan Schultz links this technique with the emphasis upon Dickinson’s poetry as already erased or damaged: “Emily Dickinson’s poems come to us so nearly pre-erased that their further erasure by Holmes dramatically frees instances of prophecy, voices from 1861-62 rediscovered in contemporary political discourse.” This forthrightly uncritical implication constitutes the speculative gesture of Holmes’s project. On one hand, then, Magee’s experiment with the recuperative powers of uncritical thinking is directed at contemporary public discourse on the internet; his book proposes that by “sculpting” such discourse to look like Dickinson poems, he can either elevate such discourse to the condition of literature or challenge the idea of literary value itself. Holmes, on the other hand, makes the uncritical proposition that strategic erasure of Dickinson’s poems will make them refer to “people and events” of the present day. In both cases, poetry seems *of* its political situation, not an opposition to it. Magee echoes William Carlos Williams on this point: “The arts generally are not...a turning away. It *is* the war or part of it, merely a different sector of the field” (Bernstein). The political interest of these books by Magee and Holmes may lie in exploring the apparent impossibility of setting up a decisive critical distance from the present situation, of untangling the mutual reliances that make a poet complicit in everything from Google’s commoditization of the Web to the history of slavery in the US to the same country’s current colonial projects in the Middle East.

Practitioners of experimental techniques such as Google sculpting and poetic erasure often understand the socio-political significance of their methods not in terms of critique and rational discourse, but in terms of affect and the social connections it enables. Rick Snyder describes Nada Gordon's flarf as recording "the pathos of being an anonymous individual in the emotional chaos of a post-9/11 world." He cites Gordon's comments on a blog, which confirm her interest in affect: "I would venture to say at least some 'flarf' is not about irony at all, but about *pathos*—and pathos, by its very nature, and certainly by its etymology, is a kind of empathy, albeit warped." As in the possessions of Dickinson, pathos gives flarf writers a way of responding to a perceived loss of contact between individuals, or between an individual and the social body. For Gordon, we might imagine flarf responding to seemingly hopeless political situations with affectively laden rhetorical questions: "'aren't we all a bunch of fools, and isn't that funny? and bittersweet? and fucked up?'" Pathos emerges when affective attachments move through circuits of loss and recovery; in the discourse of flarf, this is the loss and recovery of political possibility.

Because Holmes's work more actively pursues critique of the present political situation, she avoids the depthless pathos of flarf's political imaginary, and in this sense her work more closely resembles Dickinson's own attitudes toward aesthetic and political futurity. Holmes includes plenty of negative judgments about recent political events, as when she transforms Dickinson's playful "I would not paint – a picture –" (F 348) and the subsequent poem into a curt verdict: "awful / to // live to know / such a day" (1862.20 [347-349]). Nonetheless, Holmes's insistence upon the power of critical judgment shines through such dark assessments. "The Danger," she writes at the very end of her book, is not that critique has become impossible, but "Is // – upon the Soul // To go without / challenging Despair" (1862.67 [494-498]). Magee and

his peers, by contrast, do not voice nostalgia for efficacious political critique, for a challenge to the despair of contemporary politics. Rather, their pathos emerges in response to the loss of that primary narrative of a lost political future—as a nostalgia not for the good old days when political critique could work, but for the days when we could even be nostalgic about those good old days. This second-order nostalgia explains Magee’s wistful reminiscence of a time not when politicians were honest but when their malevolence at least seemed motivated by some intelligence one could imagine opposing. In its ongoingness and self-exposure, this pathetic relation to the impossibility of political hope appears as the inverted equivalent of Dickinson’s own stance in relation to social futures, as Howe envisions it. For Dickinson the idea of grace leaves the future open to fulfillments she need not even pursue—leading, Howe thinks, to her indifference about publishing. This loss of loss itself reduplicates (like Dickinson’s faith in grace) into a pathetic posture in relation to political struggle and social contact.⁶¹

If such impossibly lapsed hope refers to something more than the efficaciousness of political critique, it might refer to an impossible imagined world in which we could be possessed by our feelings and possess them too—in which we might enjoy the social life of the fetish without the usual alienation. The poems in *My Angie Dickinson* explore the impossibility of this dream. Here affect provides social connection, yet no longer counts fully as our own:

The Mind is the most Exquisite Torture—
 World rejoices—It’s a very good thing—
 Infibulation—closing penisvagina—with suture—
 Or ring

The Heart—is a Handout—for Discussion

⁶¹ We might count “hope” as a common term for the lost object of flarf’s political pathos. This was also the watchword of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign—a movement hailed, at the time, as restoring to the jaded Left a “hope” for the possibility of some redemptive political future. Both the production of flarf and the debates about it have lost some intensity since about the time of Obama’s election. Perhaps this merely signals a new poetic school settling in for the long run, or else the waning of a movement limited to the George W. Bush years, an especially pathetic moment in United States socio-political history.

Island's faltering tourist—Trade—
 Remembrance of The Stomach—is shortened.—
 Real name: Angeline (068)

The first stanza turns from platitude to shock, from the familiar ideas of a world rejoicing and mental torture to the grotesque imagery of infibulation. Infibulation might cause or stem from mental torture, or it could be affiliated with the world rejoicing, perhaps as a grim distraction from the greater tortures of mental life. The genital “closing” might remind us that any closure between a world rejoicing and a mind that tortures itself would prove this macabre. Stanza two makes an analogous series of transitions. Just as the mind had been not a seat of knowledge but of torture, the heart is not a self-certain interiority but a “handout.” It is given away freely, like charity, or it is ephemeral as a classroom exercise. In any case, the heart is no longer that organ most intensely mine, most closely linked with my emotional life. We can discuss it as we discuss a tropical island's tourism industry, or as we discuss a “remembrance of the stomach,” perhaps of an especially good or bad meal. The *who* of affective sensitivity becomes an *it*, ready for distribution. As Jennifer Ashton puts it, “What's striking about Flarf...is just how impersonal the personal presence in the poem is” (“Sincerity” 99). Through the intimate public space of the internet, matters of the heart, of personal taste and traumatic haunting, turn to matters of consumption, commodity, and economy—material modes of possession.

The final line again explores the material-spiritual ambivalence that results from a possessive theory of affect. “Real name: Angeline.” By unpacking her full name, Magee suggests that even our attachment to a Hollywood star provides shorthand for a spiritual elevation that may be latent within the poems in the same way Emily Dickinson is. In the foreword to *My Angie Dickinson*, Magee explains his strange conflation of the two Dickinsons:

Why *Angie* Dickinson? Most obviously to disrupt some of the pieties around Emily Dickinson's work that I don't believe have served her poems very well. (As

an example, I would note the rarely mentioned fact that Emily Dickinson is one of the funniest poets ever.) Then too, Angie Dickinson is a sort of Zelig figure in American popular culture (and in particular on the internet)

Notwithstanding this rationale, the likeness of the two names leaves one apprehensive about the contingency of their linkage in Magee's book. One suspects that if the actress had instead been named Edna Pound, we might now have a book of flarf called *The Edna Pound Era*—no doubt a longer book, if not a more legible one. Born Angeline Brown, the actress adopted her first husband's surname, so her link to Emily seems a sheer orthographic coincidence, albeit shaped by a patriarchal kinship system. Indeed, to call Angie Dickinson a "Zelig figure" is to elide the equally patriarchal history by which a talented actress was cast in increasingly sexualized roles that exploited her body more than her skill as a performer. As a result, Angie Dickinson's star sign in post-classical Hollywood was subject to the same deflationary trajectory that flarf itself explores.⁶² The title of Magee's book and the poems themselves mention Angie, never Emily. Glancing at the cover, one would have to know Howe's work to catch the reference to this other Dickinson. Hence, Magee uses the two names to construct a rhetoric of insider knowledge based upon false expectations of ignorance. The insider knowledge is all but assured because among the very few who actually read such books as Magee's, essentially no one can be expected *not* to know Howe's work, let alone Emily Dickinson's.

In response to *My Angie Dickinson*, I wonder not so much why Angie as why *Emily* Dickinson. Some see the post-political, internet-savvy techniques of flarf as pursuing "the conscious erasure of self or ego" (Sullivan). In this case, what motivates Magee's possessive

⁶² Angie Dickinson worked successfully with a number of important directors in the 1960s, producing cutting-edge films just after the Production Code was abolished. These included *The Killers* (dir. Don Siegel, 1964), *The Chase* (dir. Arthur Penn, 1966), and *Point Blank* (dir. John Boorman, 1967). During the 1970s, however, she was increasingly cast as an exploitation element in B-movies such as *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (dir. Roger Vadim, 1971) and *Big Bad Mama* (dir. Steve Carver, 1974). By the time Brian de Palma cast her in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), she was better known as a sex object than for her considerable acting abilities.

attachment to an individual writer, and to Emily Dickinson in particular? If Angie serves “to disrupt some of the pieties around” Emily, then what pieties might Emily herself disrupt or invoke in this context? Robert McClure Smith begins to answer these questions when he links such pieties with the investments in Dickinson’s possessions I have been tracking:

as so many Dickinson scholars engage in a flight from history and sexuality...in order to fetishize fascicle manuscripts, to pursue somatic contact with documents the poet fingered, to pilgrimage to Harvard and Amherst to touch the relics, to ponder lost and irrecoverable intentions in new hypertextual scriptures, it may be a more than opportune moment to ask pointedly what makes of this particular poet, at this particular juncture, a consummate saint or martyr (15)

The “moment” to ask such questions has become only more “opportune” in the years since Smith’s writing, given that the intensity of possessive claims upon Dickinson has only continued to increase. In the context of *flarf*, the poet provides literary prestige to a genre normally more at home with cult celebrities and canned phrases. Inasmuch as *flarf* carries with a parodic distance from its cultural referents, the book’s apophatic claim upon Emily Dickinson might seem to mock or displace the possessive rhetoric of affective ignorance that guides *My Emily Dickinson* and so many possessive responses, instead addressing the poet outside the “pieties” of this framework. But by emphasizing the visual texture of Dickinson’s work, Magee seems to read alongside rather than against those who have followed Howe’s lead in emphasizing the visuality of the poems. Likewise, Magee’s use of possessive rhetoric may mean the book perpetuates the familiar enchainment of possession, affection, and ignorance. In this way, the possessive discourse’s pathetic forms of attachment set up significant obstacles to imagining a critical distance from this theory of affective ignorance. Through the possessive responses, the generic and political meanings of Dickinson’s work unfold at a crossing between, on one hand, the histories of various identity-political discourses and, on the other, the ignorance and uncertainty that continue to inform our reading. In the same way, an approach to Dickinson arrived at almost

by chance, through Howe's appropriation of the poet's own possessive phrasing, has combined with an almost inexorable series of technological developments to enable a form of affective interpretation that has broad consequences for the afterlives of lyric poetry and that now seems all but inevitable as a perspective on Dickinson in particular. The next chapter examines weak ignorance in terms of this conflicted view of history, as at once a continuous causative process and the product of certain seemingly random events.⁶³

Cristanne Miller concludes her review essay, "Whose Dickinson?" with an optimistic prediction that "the current phase of sharply differentiated editing and publishing on Dickinson's poetry will not settle into competing representations of 'MY Emily Dickinson' but instead lead toward...common appreciation of the poet's rare powers" (251). By recognizing our shared attachments, Miller believes, we will soon find ourselves constructing an idea of *our* Dickinson that may displace the isolating individualism of a poet so often claimed as *mine*. Given the socializing energies generated through the possessive rhetoric of affective ignorance, Miller may be right. It remains to the still open future of Dickinson's reception, however, to show whether a rhetoric of shared possession can overcome the dyadic claims of personal attachment and affective contact that the recent possessions make. For now, our Emily Dickinsons and the lyric genre whose afterlives they help us to trace seem irrecoverably shaped by our possessive claims not to know them, but to feel them.

⁶³ Marta Werner briefly describes how changing views of the relation between history and contingency have affected Dickinson's reception, and she focuses upon a socio-historical moment crucial to the following chapter, the Cold War ("Woe" 28).

Chapter 2. Language Writing as Historical Reading:
Gertrude Stein, Jackson Mac Low, and *A Million Random Digits*

The previous chapter showed that the framing of affect as a mode of weak ignorance has helped to make Emily Dickinson's reputation especially important for the development of current ideas about the lyric genre. Even poets like Janet Holmes and Michael Magee, whose experiments take them beyond traditional lyricism, confirm Dickinson's importance for thinking about the lyric because their responses to her continue to position affect as a lyrical alternative to knowledge-oriented strategies of social critique. By contrast, this chapter addresses a purportedly anti-lyrical writer, Gertrude Stein, and it argues that the rhetoric of weak ignorance has enabled her respondents to see her as exploring alternatives to lyric conventions. In the period of the lyric's afterlives, in other words, the language of not-knowing shapes the borders of the lyric genre, not only marking lyric poems as such but also informing the search for alternatives to lyric norms. Reading a series of chance-operational rewritings of Stein's work by the Language poet Jackson Mac Low, this chapter argues that Stein and the Language writers who claim her as a precursor share an interest in how *randomness* and related ideas, such as chance and contingency, shape a poem's relation to its historical contexts. Because randomness undercuts common ideas about causation and agency, both Stein and Mac Low view it as enabling a weak ignorance in relation to history. Randomness upsets historical sense-making even as it informs what happens, and in this way it sets the limits of historical thought. However, Stein and Mac Low do not respond in the same way to this notion of randomness as an other of historical knowledge. Their different responses illustrate the entwinement of randomness with lyric expression, and they challenge the assumption that Stein and her inheritors have compatible views about literary value and a poem's relation to its historical contexts.

Like many of the Stein texts Mac Low rewrites, his “Stein” poems invite readers to think about historical relations in terms of the opposition between, on one hand, exposure to historical contingency and, on the other, autonomy and isolation from historical contexts. For instance, “Little Open Place (Stein 4)” rewrites Stein’s *A Long Gay Book* (1912; 1933) and, in the process, explores a familiar distinction between open possibilities and the security of closure:

Little regular neat.

Well leave leave them the open place refusing nicely.

Little materials light peculiar happy people here who little choose hearing
deepening words made whole.

That whole little half gave more coming than the larger pressure.
Have time of an afternoon and say days’ dearest may likely refuse learning.

Leave leave them the very open room and sing it as one blanket.
Such time’s better and in and here have love have this.
Likely well do those four sing the opening of that thing.
Use open fire to cook with there the whole following afternoon.
The four likely gave the whole thing more pressure.
The mentioned pears were very green like matter showing more.
Children’s merriment happening and merriment.
Not an afternoon describing apples and nothing more.
Whispering afternoons.

Little leg pears.

Leave leave them well nicely refusing the open place.

The trope of openness and closure organizes “Stein 4,” which begins with an easy pleasantness, as of picnics on “whispering afternoons” among “children’s merriment,” “happy people,” and ripe fruit. The recurring “leave leave” and gerunds lend a comforting, rhythmic hum, but Mac Low’s persistently end-stopped lines undercut this comfort with a feeling of automation and inevitability. Likewise the title’s “open place,” seemingly ideal for a cookout, soon becomes a place for “refusing nicely” to inhabit, and by the poem’s end we are “refusing the open place”

outright, as if succumbing to a “larger pressure.” We close with a mystery about “the opening of that thing” and why it must be avoided or refused. The poem tries to close itself, as if crossing tightly its “little leg pears.” One opening the “Stein” poems see as an occasion for such demurral is their own openness to the historical contexts in which they are composed and into which they might be placed. Despite Mac Low’s efforts to make a poem a “Little regular neat” place, his work scrutinizes its opening onto a chaotic historical world.

This contrast between “open” and “closed” writing does not serve exclusively to describe a poem’s relation to historical contexts, of course, but enables a familiar series of links between aesthetic, political, formal, and indeed historical commitments for poetry. In this way the open-closed opposition has helped to structure existing narratives of twentieth-century American poetry.⁶⁴ This chapter explores some entailments of this binary that often remain implicit in literary histories. It especially interrogates the rhetoric that commonly sets up oppositions between a text’s historicity and its singularity as a record of self-expression—arguing that the discourse of randomness often helps to organize this opposition and thereby to distinguish what counts as a lyric poem from what does not. Mac Low’s work shows that the alignment of closure with lyrical texts and openness with non-lyrical writing does not prove as steady as some suppose. Rather, the expressivist project of lyric autonomy does not oppose the chaos of the actual world but in fact takes randomness as a resource for understanding the historical contingency of its own discourse. Far from securing itself against the chanciness of historical context, lyric writing often understands randomness as sustaining attractive modes of historical relation. Although in different ways, both Mac Low and Stein view randomness as structuring a text’s historical relations.

⁶⁴ The opposition gained much of its influence from Charles Olson’s essay, “Projective Verse” (1950), which calls for a poetry of the “open field.” Olson appears to have adopted the open/closed distinction from French theorist René Nelli’s essay, “Poésie ouverte poésie fermée” (1947). See Maud 84.

Written near the end of his life, the “Stein” series is Mac Low’s longest serial project, comprising over 160 poems, only some two dozen of which are published.⁶⁵ To compose each “Stein” poem, Mac Low selected and rearranged words from a single Stein text, through a combination of chance operations, deterministic procedures, and the poet’s own decisions. To perform the chance operations, Mac Low did not use such familiar equipment as dice, a deck of cards, or the flip of a coin. Instead he used a thick reference volume, titled *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*, which consists almost exclusively of a vast table of random numbers. This strange book was produced in the late-1940s by the RAND Corporation, a military and intelligence think tank, at the request of their scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. The scientists needed a large set of random numbers for a new mathematics called the Monte Carlo method—a method developed to aid the design of thermonuclear weapons. In short, the so-called RAND Book was created at the dawn of the Cold War to facilitate the production of the deadliest weapons ever built. The preface to the latest edition emphasizes that since its creation the book has found more peaceful uses in fluid dynamics, economics, and several other fields, but its notoriety stems from its central role in nuclear armament. Given its military origin, *A Million Random Digits* seems an extraordinarily unlikely piece of equipment for the avant-garde writer’s toolkit. As we shall see, however, Mac Low uses the RAND Book precisely because it opens an array of challenging questions about the relations among poetic production, randomness, and literary and political histories. Through its unusual chance-operational equipment, the “Stein” series illuminates how randomness organizes the interface between any literary text and its historical contexts.

⁶⁵ The largest group of “Stein” poems appears in the posthumous collection, *Thing of Beauty* (2008), but others appear in the literary magazine *Deluxe Rubber Chicken* and online at the Electronic Poetry Center and the Academy of American Poets web site.

Mac Low is far from alone among Language poets in viewing Stein as a vital precursor. His equipment for this reception of Stein, however, indicates that the “Stein” series does not simply confirm a predictable avant-garde lineage, from modernist experimentalism to Language writing. Instead, the series emerges at the intersection of multiple literary, political, and technological histories—not least of which, the history of nuclear war—all of them shaped by the idea of randomness as a mode of historical regard. In this way, the *RAND Book* demonstrates randomness’s power to set the horizon of historical interpretation in general. When things happen just by chance, historical narratives appear ungrounded, destabilized by a sense of arbitrariness. Far from signifying a radical outside of history, randomness offers ways of approaching historical relations and value-judgments as marked with a stubborn contingency, yet still bearing consequences that solicit accounting. Mac Low and other Language writers share with Stein an interest in this relation between randomness and historicity, but they understand it quite differently. The Stein of *A Long Gay Book* and related works views historical contingency as disrupting the forms of closure that normally secure aesthetic autonomy and value-judgments, and she responds with a sense of formal malleability that enables her work to internalize and cope with randomness. Mac Low’s “Stein” poems, meanwhile, tarry with ideas of lyric expression and literary value—ideas not typically affiliated with Language writing—as means to resist the disruptiveness of historical contingency. Mac Low thereby calls into question the common opposition between procedural poetics and the traditional coordinates of lyricism. His approach to randomness in fact exemplifies the broader Language movement’s strategies for understanding the historicity and value of their work. These different responses to historical randomness illuminate an important set of recuperative gestures for historical thought—gestures

that structure not only Stein's and Mac Low's generic and literary-historical positions, but also the broader encounter between randomness and historical interpretation.

As an avenue for interpreting the "Stein" series, meanwhile, *A Million Random Digits* offers important methodological cues for new media poetics. The rhetoric of "digital" media has often implied that numbers enjoy a mathematical ideality, severed from any specific material substrate or historical context, and the sheer disorder of the RAND Book further suggests that its digits lack any necessary relation to their own material history. The book's enduring power to signify historically, however, indicates that future work in "digital" poetics will need to clarify whether and how such mathematical ideality actually obtains. The RAND Book also indicates that not all methods of digital composition or reading are primarily informatical. Dominant models of machine reading understand the computer as a mechanism for gathering, manipulating, and representing positively given information, and they elide the extent to which our interactions with computers are shaped by less knowledge-oriented modes of thought such as frustration, disorientation, uncertainty, confusion, and play.⁶⁶ *A Million Random Digits* is an important artifact from the early history of electronic computing, and as equipment for chance operations, it underscores the largely unrecognized extent to which these less orderly, less instrumental modes of thought structure our interactions with computational devices. A fully developed methodology for digital poetics will more thoroughly negotiate the relation between our non-informatical interactions with computers and the economies of knowledge such critical methods themselves produce. As a model of randomness in digital poetry, the RAND Book points Mac Low and his readers in that direction.

⁶⁶ Key studies of electronic literature and machine reading include Funkhouser, Glazier, Hayles, Montfort, and Moretti. To varying degrees, all assume that computers deliver and manipulate positively given information. Even outside of technological contexts, poetry critics increasingly stress poetry's informational characteristics. Cf. Dworkin and Mukherjee.

Poets have often viewed chance operations as unsettling contemporary aesthetic and political influences, a demurral from historical contexts through chance's indifference to causation. Mac Low's choice of compositional equipment, however, insinuates a specific and uncomfortably militaristic history within the scene of writing. It thus suggests that even a poetic practice intent on decontextualizing itself historically emerges from specific material histories. Still, the operations that the RAND Book facilitates really are random, and this randomness does as much to shape the "Stein" poems as do the more determinate contexts from which the poems emerge, such as Mac Low's fairly predictable decision to rewrite Stein and not, say, Robert Frost. How and to what extent can any historical hermeneutic attend a text produced randomly? The "Stein" poems seem to place an impossible demand upon historicist readers—a challenge to render historical meaning from texts produced at random and, simultaneously, to acknowledge that such randomness yields a feeling of historical weightlessness, a sense that things might easily have happened otherwise, just by chance. This bind shapes any historicist encounter with randomness, but Mac Low's use of *A Million Random Digits* sharpens its contradictions; in view of the materials used to produce them, the "Stein" poems illuminate the paradoxical encounter between randomness and historical reading. Mac Low's and Stein's ways of relating to literary and political histories emerge through this encounter.

In the "Stein" series, Mac Low most often selects words from *Tender Buttons* (1912; 1914), *A Long Gay Book*, and *Pink Melon Joy* (1915; 1922). All three were composed between 1912 and 1915, a crucial period for the development of Stein's "experimental" style, one of transition between the notoriously impenetrable *The Making of Americans* (completed in 1911) and more accessible works such as the lectures and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932). Among what Steven Meyer calls the "dissociative writing of the middle period," Stein's famous

book of prose-poetry *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* has become an especially central representative of Stein's experimental style (122). As examples of her more challenging mode, all three of these texts are important for questions about Stein's relation to history. Her appreciators and detractors alike have often positioned such works as isolationist and solipsistic, indifferent to the political exigencies of historical reality. This tendency has led many to celebrate her more accessible fiction while forgetting or deriding more challenging texts like *Tender Buttons*. Others have responded, like Phoebe Davis, that "Stein's literary experimentation is directly connected to her sense of history" (574). However, where Davis highlights the return of "experimental narrative techniques" in Stein's later prose, this chapter argues that the "middle" experimental works themselves provide a clear picture of Stein's theory of history and forms of historical regard. These earlier works also have proved more significant for literary history, as Mac Low's interest in them suggests. The Language poets and other writers whom Stein has influenced most deeply are primarily drawn not to her more accessible prose, but to *Tender Buttons* and other challenging texts from this period.⁶⁷ By reading these Stein texts through their uptake by one such poet, this chapter examines how various ideas of randomness have shaped that influence and its literary-historical significance.

These readings contribute to several studies that reconsider Stein's relation to the American avant-garde writers who have long claimed her as a forebear. Recent critics have argued persuasively that Stein does not pursue a play of indeterminacy or privilege the experience of individual readers, as so many have claimed, but that she views the literary object

⁶⁷ The most prominent exception to this rule is John Ashbery, who prefers *Stanzas in Meditation* over the earlier poetry. However, Ashbery is oftener called a "belated romantic" than a bleeding-edge experimentalist, so he does not provide the soundest barometer of Stein's influence on the avant-garde (Glavey 527). See Ashbery's review of *Stanzas in Meditation* in *Poetry*.

as aesthetically autonomous and independent from the vicissitudes of reader responses.⁶⁸ Largely confirming what had been a minority view, these studies still do not fully explain *why* the Language writers and related avant-garde schools have made such powerful claims upon Stein as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*—a conundrum, if her work does not in fact support their claims about her nascent postmodernism. Although Stein does not actively pursue disorder as many suppose, her writing often seeks ways of responding to randomness, especially to a concept of history as contingent. Her postures in relation to historical randomness provide a major attraction for Language writers such as Mac Low, and her responses to randomness inform Stein’s generic commitments, her idea of aesthetic value, and her sense of literary history. *Tender Buttons* and related works claim order as a means of self-sufficiency, but to do so they assume an unmitigable malleability, a quality of accommodation that protects them from external disorder and makes pliancy itself a major poetic commitment for Stein. Critics emphasizing Stein’s investment in a poem’s aesthetic autonomy and organic unity have often relied upon historicist hermeneutics to illuminate her intellectual contexts. I aim to supplement these studies with an examination of Stein’s poetics—the aesthetic, generic, and formal commitments that set the conditions of possibility for her work—but without viewing poetics as unhistorical. Rather, by exploring how these parameters help Stein respond to historical randomness, we can understand her poetics itself as a form of historical regard.

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Mac Low produces each “Stein” poem according to a process he calls “diastic reading,” a combination of chance operations and rule-governed procedures whose product he then adjusts

⁶⁸ Marjorie Perloff makes the most extensive and persuasive case for Stein as anticipating later avant-garde poetics, primarily in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981). Perloff was not first to position Stein in this way; see Schmitz and the 1978 feature in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* on “Reading Stein.” The primary recent refutations of this long appropriation of Stein by the postmodern avant-garde are Ashton, Cope, Liesl Olson, and Siraganian. Perloff too has softened her initial claims about Stein’s nascent postmodernism, in *21st-Century Modernism* (2002).

according to his own taste. To describe this procedure I will trace the production of one poem, “A Feather Likeness of the Justice Chair (Stein 100).” Having chosen a Stein work to rewrite—in this case, *Tender Buttons*—he begins with the random selection of a “seed” text that will direct the rest of this procedure. For “Stein 100,” Mac Low used the RAND Book to select randomly the fifty-third paragraph of *Tender Buttons* as a seed text:

A fact is that when the direction is just like that,
no more, longer, sudden and at the same time not
any sofa, the main action is that without a blaming
there is no custody. (18)⁶⁹

This passage determines the course of the subsequent rewriting. Starting at the top of the larger “source” text from which the seed comes—here, *Tender Buttons*—Mac Low selects from it the first word whose first letter matches the first letter of the seed text. Here the seed’s first letter is *A*, and the first word in *Tender Buttons* to begin with *A* is the indefinite article, “A.” Mac Low then moves to the next letter in the seed, the *F* in “fact.” Since that letter begins a word, he selects the next word in *Tender Buttons* to begin, like “fact,” with an *F*: “feather.” Mac Low then resumes in *Tender Buttons* where he left off, now searching for a word whose second letter, like “fact,” is *A*; then a word whose third letter, like “fact,” is *C*; then one whose fourth letter, like “fact,” is *T*; and then moving to the next word in the seed, “is,” he seeks a word in the source whose first letter, like “is,” is *I*. This yields “a feather table reckless gratitude it.” The spelling of the randomly selected seed thus dictates which words get chosen. Here are the first three stanzas of “Stein 100.” I have underlined the letters that key the words to the seed text above:

A feather table: reckless gratitude.
It is that-there that means best.

White the green grinding trimming thing!

⁶⁹ Quotations of *Tender Buttons* are from the first edition. Mac Low’s note to “Stein 100” misquotes this paragraph’s sixth word as “any.” In fact the text reads “the,” and Mac Low’s poem itself indicates that the correct word was used in the procedure.

The disgrace, like stripes.
 More selection, slighter intention.

Rosewood stationing is use journey: curious dusty empty length.
 Winged cake: the cake, the plan that neglects to make color certainly.
 Time long could winter: elegant consequences monstrous.
 So much and guided holders garments are--and arrangements.
 Staring then that when sudden same time's necessary, that circular
same's more necessary, not actually aching.

In the “makingway endnote” that accompanies each poem, Mac Low refers to the diastic process as “reading-through text selection.” The procedure literally reads through Stein’s text, selecting words. The likeness to *Tender Buttons* is therefore unsurprising. Words like “table,” “trimming,” “feather,” and “dusty” recall the book’s domestic environ, and some of the stranger constructions—“white” as a verb, “disgrace” as a pattern—recall Stein’s own slanted descriptions. But Mac Low’s differences from Stein are more interesting. These poems have line breaks, for instance, where *Tender Buttons* and most of the other source texts do not. The diastic procedure does not produce the line breaks. They are among the “personal” touches (to use Mac Low’s term) that he makes afterwards, but they do not for that reason provide him with a vehicle of nuance or personal expression. Rather, he end-stops each line with concluding punctuation, like a carriage-return, and this gives the poems a mechanical feel that recalls the rigid procedure itself. Even the exclamation point in line three—normally a sign of expressive intensity—primarily helps readers to recognize the line as a command; the line’s abstruseness keeps it from sounding genuinely exclamatory. As Lisa Siraganian notes, the relative paucity of punctuation in *Tender Buttons* reflects Stein’s conviction that “*all* diacritical marks...should be eliminated in order to confirm the irrelevance of the reader” in relation to textual meaning (663). By contrast, Mac Low’s “Stein” poems reintroduce line breaks and punctuation as tools to shape the reader’s experience of the text, but Mac Low deploys these elements in a manner that makes the poems

feel all the more stilted and mechanically managed. In other words, Mac Low's ostensibly "personal" use of punctuation and line breaks ultimately suggests that a text produced through an impersonal system of chance and deterministic procedures cannot necessarily be rendered expressive through mere manipulation of its formal and diacritical elements. The "Stein" poems often explore difficulties that arise when Mac Low attempts to recover a sense of expression through a series of impersonal procedures that limit and destabilize such authorial shaping.

Despite the poem's claim to "slighter intention," Mac Low does choose to deviate from the diastic procedure. He adds the word "means" in line two. Still stranger is "Rosewood" in line six, a word that paradoxically appears at once as a fulfillment of the procedure's rules and as a sign that to be fulfilled, they must be broken. *Tender Buttons* sets it as "Rose-wood," and the diastic procedure encounters it while searching for a word whose eighth letter is *O*, to match "direction" in the seed. "Rose-wood" qualifies only if we count the hyphen as a letter. Yet Mac Low often used Charles O. Hartman's computer program for diastic reading, DIATEX5, which does not seem to view hyphens as letters.⁷⁰ Moreover, "Stein 100" itself indicates that hyphens do not count: Mac Low adds a hyphen in "that-there that means best," casting them as diacritical marks to be arranged after the procedure. Stranger still, the published version of "Stein 100" renders it as "Rosewood"—a spelling that, if in the original, would disqualify the word from being selected. Not only is the seed text for each "Stein" poem chosen at random, but also the procedure consists of arbitrary rules that Mac Low violates arbitrarily.

Here is what the poet says about his diastic reading technique, in a letter submitting some "Stein" poems to a journal:

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Charles O. Hartman for his email correspondence about DIATEX5 and to Ron Starr for making an online engine for diastic reading, along with a description of the process, which have disappeared since the time of writing. Hartman discusses his programs for computer poetry in *Virtual Muse* (1996). Ben Johnson currently provides a modified diastic reading program on his website, though without explanation of its function.

The methods I've used since the 1960s are actually deterministic rather than chance operations in that if one uses them in the same way with the same sources and seeds they will always produce the same outputs...but now I always, to some extent, modify the results of the procedure, making personal decisions of many different kinds. (*Thing* 376)

Positioning the technique between procedural determinism and his “personal decisions,” Mac Low repudiates the third term of randomness, the chance operation that starts the process. Yes, given the same seed and source texts, the diastic text is reproducible, but that is a very strange given. It excludes the random selection that he mentions in each “makingway endnote” as an important first step in the procedure. Taking this step into account, the chances of randomly selecting the same seed text, and thus getting the same product, become quite slim. Whereas Mac Low views his “Stein” poems and similar works as primarily exploring the interface between deterministic text-manipulation and more traditional lyric expression, his rhetorical treatment of chance indicates a different concern entirely. Every note to every “Stein” poem describes the chance operation that begins the process, and he carefully describes the RAND Book whenever he uses it. In these notes Mac Low returns again and again to his process’s decisive chance operation and to the peculiar equipment used to accomplish it. However, his reluctance to acknowledge his project’s chanciness, when describing the series as a whole, insinuates a broader set of anxieties—first, about his work’s relation to the milieu of militaristic Cold War paranoia from which his compositional equipment emerged and, second, about the extent to which the ideas of personal expression or invention can survive in a world understood as fundamentally chaotic.

This chapter frequently describes such “anxiety” as the referent of poetic expression or the occasion for a defensive response. The term warrants specification, especially in the context of poetic revisions like Mac Low’s. In his influential study, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973),

Harold Bloom casts anxiety as the sign of a poet's struggle to differentiate himself from his most influential predecessors. Although the "Stein" poems provide an occasion to reconsider the place of Bloom's account in intellectual history, this chapter does not link anxiety with the psychology of poetic production as such, nor with the abstract forms of displacement that Bloom describes. Rather, anxiety here refers to a more historically specific set of concerns about a person's precarious and random place in a world whose disorder often seems forbiddingly violent. Mac Low's is not the anxiety of a Freudian family drama but of the person for whom, as William Faulkner put it in his Nobel Prize address, "There are no longer questions of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Instead of despecifying a condition of influence or an interpretive impasse, anxiety here refers to an historically specific cultural condition, one that emerged around mid-century and shaped Western attitudes about war, history, and politics at least until the close of the Cold War. W.H. Auden understood the term thus in *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), whose prologue describes "war-time" as the time "when everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person, when even the most prudent become worshipers of chance, and when, in comparison to the universal disorder of the world outside, his Bohemia seems as cosy and respectable as a suburban villa" (3). Although the chaos and destruction of war provides a potent symbol of this more worldly, more historical sense of anxiety, it characterizes a much broader, more pervasive set of concerns about the contingent historical emplacement of a person or a text—and about how to respond to that contingency. When I refer to anxiety, therefore, I refer to the expression of or defensive response to such concerns about the relation between history and randomness.

Purportedly composed through a deterministic process, many lines from the "Stein" poems sound eerily self-reflective, as of a voice expressing itself. A later stanza of "Stein 100"

states, “They asked that her speech be repeated” (73). Whose speech could this mean but Stein’s, and who could “they” be but some audience? Similarly, the opening line of “Stein 32” declares it “Pleasant to be repeating what they went to.” Perhaps “they went to” Stein’s original writing—much as Mac Low and his fellow Language writers, in the mid-1970s, “went to” Stein as a vital precursor—and the poem finds it “pleasant to be repeating” words so often appreciated. Again, later in “Stein 100,” the poem seems to comment on its own project: “Imitation?—imitation is a joy gurgle” (18). Even as the poems “gurgle” with the disorder of a text arranged through an arbitrary procedure, a sufficiently paranoid reader will glimpse seemingly expressive moments of self-awareness. Neither Mac Low’s comments nor the texts themselves equip such a reader to decide whether this apparent expressiveness is a sheer accident of the process, meriting no special attention, or is a poetically significant aspect of this work. Far from inducing an attempt to arbitrate this difference, the randomness of Mac Low’s method highlights this indecision itself as a fundamental difficulty for any effort to read historically a text that, like so much Language writing, moves beyond conventional commitments to individual genius and good lyrical form. Thus the “Stein” poems ask, without necessarily answering, whether we can pursue historical interpretation of post-lyrical writing without some notion of personal expression to ground the meanings that emerge from texts such as these. The lingering whisper of an expressive, self-aware voice in the “Stein” poems appears as a kind of lure, inviting strategies of lyrical interpretation that the poet’s procedural methods should embarrass. By the same token, the unhappy origin of Mac Low’s equipment would seem irrelevant to the poems because it provides merely random digits, yet the material history sustaining the poet’s work never fully recedes from view. As we shall see, Mac Low seems to minimize the importance of randomness in his

work not because he thinks it trivial but because he senses chance's power to complicate his own relation to creative production and to the literary and political histories through which he writes.

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Stein too understands a text's historicity as a disruptively contingent relation to the world, but instead of pursuing self-expression as a hedge against historical randomness, she pursues a more flexible, accommodating response. The experimental texts of her middle period seek self-sufficiency as a refuge from their contingent historical positions, and they disarm randomness's destabilizing powers by addressing it as an occasion for formal play. Reading Stein's formal play as an indicator of both her relation to history and her generic self-understanding, I share many historicist critics' interest in what Kelley Wagers calls "a representational strategy that is meant to contest historical as well as literary conventions" (23). However, I do not follow Wagers and others who argue that Stein's historical postures are therefore "orchestrated to revive contingency in place of certainty" (28). Such a position implies that contingency will necessarily support a liberatory politics of history—and that Stein sought such a politics in the first place. In fact, Stein's experimental work sees history not as a matter of "certainty" but as disruptively random, and the texts pursue formal arbitrariness as a recuperative evasion of anxieties about historical disorder. Her playful arbitrariness thus sustains a poetics of historical regard. In its first paragraph, *Tender Buttons* calls itself "not unordered in not resembling" (9). It brackets its relation to whatever seems external, avoiding both mimetic and symptomatic responsiveness to the world. The book claims orderliness as a token of self-sufficiency, but in doing so it assumes an unmistakable formal malleability. If *Tender Buttons* is "not unordered," its order is not rigidly structured or brittle; logical, syntactic, formal, and indeed conceptual pliancy deeply informs the book's poetic achievements. This malleability enables Stein to write poetry that explores the

ideas of genre, form, and value, but that generally avoids making positive claims of knowledge about these concepts.

Stein's experimental writing responds to anxieties about historical randomness by taking disorder as an occasion to play with the formal arbitrariness of language—where “play” suggests both ludic amusement and a kind of slack or flexibility in the concepts she explores. This sense of arbitrariness is not tied to a reader-oriented impulse for indeterminacy, as both her postmodernizing readers and their opponents often claim, but to Stein's ideas about literary value and generic norms. Such play enables her to disavow and evade two sorts of knowledge about genres. First, where a text's formal traits might normally position it in relation to the histories of literary genres, these Stein works underscore the arbitrariness of formal devices that typically constitute a text's generic identity. Second, through this play with formal arbitrariness, Stein's texts frame the formal markers of genre as themselves reliant upon uncertainty. Like other works from Stein's middle period, *Tender Buttons* explores the generically ambivalent space of prose poetry, and its formal play challenges the precepts of both genres to which this hybrid position refers, showing that prose can be prosodically intricate and that poetry can look and sound banal. These deflationary gestures in relation to the book's own generic position distance it from the histories of literary genres from which it emerges, underscoring an old but important lesson about literary form: the sounds and shapes of words really are arbitrary, lacking any intrinsic relation to their meaning. Here Stein takes an anti-lyrical position indeed. She eschews the wishful mysticism that sees a deep connection between the forms of words and their meanings, and she also declines to dramatize the loss of this formal adequation through a typically lyrical pathos. Instead she plays with language's pliant, arbitrary forms in an effort to inoculate her work against the more disruptive randomness of the actual, historical world.

The formal textures of *Tender Buttons* thus do not strongly support hermeneutic responses but contribute to the work's enclosure and self-sufficiency. The opening paragraph offers rich aural play without strict formal patterning:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (9)

Like sounds concatenate here. "Kind...glass" echoes "BLIND GLASS," and the series of open *A* sounds in "CARAFE," "GLASS," and "glass" unfolds against the hard *C* sounds of "CARAFE," "kind," "cousin," and "color." Stein loves indefinite articles, and the affinity yields patterns both aural and graphical: "a cousin" follows "A CARAFE" and "A kind"; "a system" follows "a spectacle" and "a single." The latter series also suggests that a poetic "spectacle" should operate as "a system" rather than a chaotic fanfare. The shared rhythm of "a system to pointing" and "The difference is spreading" points toward another important habit: Stein frequently uses gerunds to render actions as static affairs. "In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling" (33). Stein's gerunds drain the scene of activity. Nominalizing verbs and hitching them to the constative "there is," the poem depicts a world in which things merely are. The clanging gerundial suffix makes the passage hum nasally, but we can draw limited hermeneutic conclusions. The construction is minimalist, reducing activity to stasis, and inasmuch as sound matches sense, we can say little more than that these gerunds make nothing happen.

At times *Tender Buttons* does refer more explicitly to prosodic convention. By casting traditional forms as arbitrary and optional, however, this aural play offers little knowledge of the

book's literary-historical posture. Early in the second part, "FOOD," we read of "all the splinter and the trunk, all the poisonous darkning drunk, all the joy in weak success, all the joyful tenderness, all the section and the tea, all the stouter symmetry" (53). Garish in rhythm and mechanical in rhyme, the passage sounds much like Edgar Allan Poe's "Alone," which tells of a life drawn "From the torrent, or the fountain— / From the red cliff of the mountain— / From the sun that round me rolled / In its autumn tint of gold— / From the lightning in the sky / As it passed me flying by" (13-18). If not for Poe's line breaks, Stein might provide an even "stouter symmetry" than he. While both present a trochaic tetrameter clipped of its final soft beat, Poe at least retains this soft beat in the first two lines cited, rhyming on unstressed syllables. Such prosodic regularity appears only rarely in *Tender Buttons*, and there is no good reason why it comes when it does. Through the mention of stout symmetry, the rhyme refers to itself as an instance of order—rather than connoting fatedness, as Poe's does. Stein's moments of formal regularity read not as fulfillments of generic norms but as playful dalliances, taken up and abandoned at a whim. They may provide "joy," but they count only as "weak success" because they offer momentary diversions instead of generic groundings. In this sense their "weak success" operates as a rhetoric of ignorance in relation to the generic or literary-historical knowledge that more decisive formal techniques would provide.

The shapes of words in *Tender Buttons* likewise highlight the fundamental arbitrariness of verbal forms, again complicating the book's generic positioning. Early in the "OBJECTS" section, the first edition's small pages and wide margins make syntactic repetition into a visual pattern:

A lamp is not the only sign of glass. The lamp and
the cake are not the only sign of stone. The lamp and
the cake and the cover are not the only necessity
altogether. (16)

A motif emerges from the vertical alignment of repeated phrases—“not the only sign of...The lamp and” and “the cake.” Stein’s repetitive syntax makes such alignments more likely, but because they result from the page width, margins, and rules for wrapping prose, these patterns are as arbitrary as the shapes of the words themselves. Subsequent editions set Stein’s text with different page and margin widths, so the vertical alignments appear in different places. In fact, most recent editions use wider pages and narrower margins, making the patterns less common. Later editions do, however, maintain other forms of visual play that underscore Stein’s performance of generic ignorance. The series of short “CHICKEN” passages in the second section, for example, does not depart from the rules for formatting prose, but their brevity makes them look like a spare poem:

CHICKEN.

Pheasant and chicken, chicken is a peculiar third.

CHICKEN.

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a dirty bird.

CHICKEN.

Alas a doubt in case of more go to say what it is cress. What is it. Mean. Potato. Loaves.

CHICKEN.

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in extra succession, sticking in. (54)

Such spareness recalls the visual habits of another poet of chickens, William Carlos Williams, yet the conventions dictating its shape are arbitrary in relation to the poem’s visual form. The capitalization and punctuation of section headings are uniform throughout the book, as is the

slight indentation of each strophe's first line. Likewise, the variable density of words across each line recalls Cummings, but in this case it results from the justified typesetting used throughout *Tender Buttons*. Aural play meanwhile gives the passage some edge. The repeated "alas" sounds like "Alice," Stein's partner, so Stein may be calling "Alice a dirty bird." Pamela Hadas sees *Tender Buttons* as a chronicle of Stein's alienation from her brother Leo in favor of her partner Alice. "Alas a dirty word" makes her lover's name disruptive and forbidden in the household the three shared during this period, and "alas a dirty third" seems to call Alice an unwanted third party, disrupting Stein's relationship with her brother. If the dirty bird, Alice, also goes by the name "chicken," then Stein's "sticking with a chicken" expresses her intention to stick with Alice despite these tensions. The word "alas" appears only in these sections and the one immediately preceding them—which describes "alas the wedding butter meat, alas the receptacle"—so this play on "alas" restricts its significance to the context of these lines about Stein's "chicken." Both aurally and visually, formal play increases the book's enclosure within its own local system of references. Stein understands the sounds and shapes of words not as generically significant markers of a relation to literary history but as arbitrary structures that lend themselves to aesthetic play and nonce signification.

The play of formal arbitrariness structures *A Long Gay Book* and *Pink Melon Joy* as well, sustaining a generic ambiguity similar to that seen in *Tender Buttons*. In its opening pages, *A Long Gay Book* looks unambiguously like prose; its paragraphs are formatted conventionally and lack the subsection headings that organize *Tender Buttons*. By the end, however, the paragraphs have become so short that they read like verse, though the rules for formatting prose remain in force:

No but no but butter.
Coo cow, coo coo coo.

Coo cow leaves of grips nicely. (252)

Stein aligns these sentences with the indentations that begin longer paragraphs, making them read at once as prose and verse. Though aural play abounds in *A Long Gay Book*, these shorter paragraphs lend a choppy cadence that coheres more around sound than syntax. Thematically, *A Long Gay Book* unfolds as a gradual transition from the relatively ordered and lucid sociological speculation and plotting of its early pages to the playful “coo”-ing of its conclusion. The prose’s increasing semblance of verse coincides with this transition. By contrast, the celebratory *Pink Melon Joy* begins with lines that look like verse:

My dear what is meat.
I certainly regret visiting.
My dear what does it matter. (280-81)

Only later do longer paragraphs reveal that these sentences are formatted as individual prose paragraphs; as at the close of *A Long Gay Book*, their first words align with the indentations at the start of longer paragraphs. We soon grasp that *Pink Melon Joy* is organized not as verse, but as a series of short prose sections, each composed of several very short paragraphs and headed by a single word or phrase. From first to last, the work occupies a space of visual indifference between verse and prose:

Pillow.

I meant to say.
Saturday.
Not polite.
Do satisfy me.
This is to say that baby is all well. That baby is baby. That baby is all well.
That there is a piano. That baby is all well. This is to say that baby is all well. This
is to say that baby is all well. (283)

The longer prose paragraph ending this section offers a “pillow,” a landing-pad to cushion the reader’s descent from above. It provides a support for the short preceding paragraphs, showing that they are not structured verse but more malleable prose; they simply do not reach past the

margin and require wrapping as the final paragraph does. As the assurance that all “is all well” suggests, neither *Pink Melon Joy* nor *A Long Gay Book* takes its generic ambiguity as cause for anxiety. Rather, both take up positions of generic ignorance—where the difference between verse and prose remains unresolved—and they take this ambiguity as an occasion to play with language’s arbitrary, accidental forms.

Such play showcases the malleability of verbal form itself, while rarely supporting an extensive hermeneutic. The texts’ irregular shapes and sounds prevent the formal marking of genre that would stabilize their relation to specific literary traditions. Instead their performance of genre relies upon a rhetoric of not-knowing with reference to linguistic form. This is a strategy of generic ignorance, casting generic performance as a practice that ignores the arbitrariness of verbal form in order to freight it with the power to signify genre. Stein’s malleability thus increases the self-referential enclosure of *Tender Buttons* and related works, which inoculate themselves against a disruptively random historical work by taking randomness itself as a logic of formal play. A similar coordination of ignorance and formal play as responses to a chaotic world appears in the opening of *A Long Gay Book*. Recalling the Romantic poets’ figure of lyrical inspiration as a return to childlike ignorance, Stein discusses infancy as a primordial ignorance that remains latent within all of us:

It is never very much to be a baby, to be such a very little thing and knowing nothing. It certainly is a very little thing and almost nothing to be a baby and without a conscious feeling. It is nothing, to be, without anything to know inside them or around them, just a baby and that was all there was once of them and so it is a broken world around them when they think of this beginning and then they lose their everlasting feeling. (153)

The affinity for gerunds reappears here, providing an aural tone for this “everlasting feeling” of ignorance that persists within us all. Everyone thinking ignorantly, like a baby, perceives a “broken world around them.” Like a baby’s oblivious involvement in its own cognition, Stein’s

formal play marks a nondefensive difference from a “broken world” out of whose chaos the infant—and the formal play itself—emerges. Instead of seeing form as an intrinsically orderly, meaningful structure for knowledge and generic positioning, Stein’s formal play is occasional and local. The sound of a rhyme, the form of a visual pattern, lacks the sense of necessity by which it would deliver knowledge or support a sustained hermeneutic response. As with her gerunds, formal play lends substance to the thoughts Stein articulates, but because this play is localized and often self-referential, it does not deliver knowledge about the text’s relation to the world. Like the infants she describes, Stein’s texts swaddle themselves in a generic ignorance, an ignorance of genre through which intense but unsystematic involvement in their own formal play enables them to turn away from the more threatening randomness of the “broken world” around them. This generic ignorance provides an important mode of historical regard for Stein. It underscores the fact that words’ formal features develop through historically contingent events; Stein’s play with arbitrary verbal forms helps her avoid the consistent generic markers that would clarify her work’s position in the history of literary genres. Instead of taking up an anxious and defensive position in relation to historical randomness, Stein inoculates her work against the disorder of the actual world by taking other forms of randomness as occasions for poetic play.

* * *

Production of *A Million Random Digits* began in the spring of 1947, and the digits were tested and used internally at Los Alamos between then and their 1955 publication by the Free Press. Mac Low would discover the book by 1958, and though he used it in early works such as “Sade Suit” (1959), his most extensive use of it was for the “Stein” series, some forty years later (Baracks). Scientists meanwhile used the digits for “various kinds of experimental probability

procedures,” the most common of which were the “random walk” problems developed at Los Alamos and nicknamed “the Monte Carlo method” (RAND ix). Invented by mathematician Stanislaw Ulam, Monte Carlo mathematics uses random sampling to understand the behavior of complex systems, such as nuclear reactions or turbulent fluid environments. Such processes involve so many interdependent variables that they seem chaotic, so random sampling proves quite effective for modeling them. A simple version of Monte Carlo sampling would allow me to compare the areas of two irregular shapes drawn on the ground. If I scatter grains of rice across these shapes at roughly even density, I can then count the number of grains to fall inside each shape. The totals will provide a ratio to compare the areas of the two shapes—where more densely scattered rice yields a more precise ratio but a more arduous calculation. Already in the 1930s Enrico Fermi had found similar procedures helpful for calculating neutron diffusion, but only when Ulam shared his ideas with John von Neumann and Nicholas Metropolis at Los Alamos in the late 1940s would these techniques see routine use (Metropolis 127). They became crucial for modeling the behavior of atoms during a nuclear reaction and thus facilitated the design of thermonuclear weapons. The “random walk” version of this technique, by which one inserts random values at certain points in a calculation, allowed scientists to trace “a genealogical history of an individual neutron” within a modeled nuclear reaction. As a means of searching out virtual origins and tracing material pathways, then, the book helped its users negotiate the interface between randomness and historicity from the very start. The popularity of such methods at Los Alamos “led to a desire for a large supply of random digits, of sufficiently high quality so that the user wouldn’t have to question whether they were good enough for his particular application” (Brown 1). To answer this need, the RAND Corporation set about producing the table that would be published as *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*. A

newsletter at Los Alamos joked that librarians would file the book under “Abnormal Psychology.” Here is a random, scaled-down excerpt representing just over one-quarter page:

34	TABLE OF RANDOM DIGITS					
01650	94988	12022	77021	60277	39048	03087
01651	72363	40974	09594	10276	09631	43203
01652	74967	66480	83894	82989	24784	42757
01653	26236	32399	81419	47377	93952	89101
01654	05632	68465	67842	85597	02094	42059
01655	67352	41392	17545	30949	87565	83820
01656	92727	35027	03117	80848	74559	96797
01657	18223	91136	39695	39943	77413	48937
01658	80723	91394	02992	11530	67845	05881
01659	75007	85671	88211	55080	15581	02685
01660	60050	80463	30926	74970	38951	14928
01661	69715	28522	73974	99491	50647	20252
01662	92096	43555	48882	60717	07963	39375
01663	35482	63353	08086	66635	71009	95777
01664	24879	78061	38949	21123	28430	72627
01665	68985	60486	58133	07709	25899	68531
01666	96601	96785	20850	70389	74637	34020
01667	66706	67664	93292	05934	71050	68192
01668	39273	41912	40198	36441	89472	38835
01669	42539	21771	58672	71421	92528	67229

One half-expects to find something meaningful as one opens the book, only to face an utter nonsense of digits. To generate the numbers, a random-frequency pulse was coupled with an electronic “roulette wheel.” Imagine spinning such a wheel at 3,000 revolutions per second and allowing a random pulse to dictate where the wheel would stop. Some uncertainty remains about the source of the random pulse. Given the nuclear context, some believe it came from a Geiger counter aimed at a piece of uranium, which decays at a steady rate (the half-life) but discharges particles at random intervals (hence the Geiger counter’s familiar chaotic clicking). In his history of RAND, however, Willis H. Ware speculates that the random pulse, “given the technology of the time, would have been a vacuum-tube machine,” which traces the turbulence of electrons in a magnetized diode (89). Either way, the random digits were generated by tracing the very chaos of atomic motion they would serve to model, and to the extent that Mac Low’s rewritings of Stein follow paths set out by these random numbers, the “Stein” poems are shaped at the most local level by the random motion of atoms. To avoid typographical error, the book was printed by photo-offset from the original tables, and the page and line numbers at left remind us that the

digits have since remained totally fixed. Just as Mac Low's process works between chance and determinist procedure, so does the disorder of these digits remain rigorously determined, unchanged since the first printing, yet not for that reason any more legible or meaningful.

Chance operations such as Mac Low's sustain a playful unpredictability within the creative process. Where randomness enables approaches to aesthetic production as a kind of game—rule-bound yet chancy—such approaches do not simply elide the potential destructiveness that the tools of randomness can support. Rather, they directly invert the scientific response to games of chance. Whereas a poet might view unpredictable play as the goal of random procedures, in other words, the RAND Book and Monte Carlo mathematics begin by understanding disorder as a purposeless aleatoric game and then instrumentalize this logic of gaming to destructive ends. According to one account, the idea for the Monte Carlo method came to Stanislaw Ulam as he was playing solitaire. He realized that the easiest way to calculate the probability of a solitaire game's coming to completion would be to lay out several sample games and record the number of moves each allowed, extrapolating a probability from these random samples (Andrieu 2). Ulam and his colleagues supposedly named the new procedure "the Monte Carlo method" in honor of Ulam's uncle, who liked to gamble. Earlier, scientists had referred to the first nuclear bomb, detonated in the Trinity test, as "the gadget," and of course the Monte Carlo method itself would contribute to a decades-long war game. Hence, the RAND Book reminds us that games do not just provide a convenient analogy for military conflict. Rather, the play of randomness can produce military conflicts and imperial projects in the first instance. The RAND Book shows that we cannot always view an aesthetic of randomness as a harmless amusement, safely bounded by its own field of play. To ask how randomness destabilizes our ideas of causation and of historical emplacement is to understand randomness

itself as a mode of historical interface—as a mode of contact between the material world and the systems by which we model, produce, represent, and potentially destroy it.

If the “Stein” series adopts a recuperative stance in relation to *A Million Random Digits*, putting it to less destructive use, then such redemptive efforts clash with the impulse to read Mac Low’s work through the material history of its production. The book telegraphs a sense of historical precariousness far beyond the specific origins and uses of its digits, for it helped to produce a threat of nuclear apocalypse that reshaped historical thinking on local and global scales. Under the threat of global nuclear conflict, it takes only one hot-head with his finger on the button to bring human history to a halt. Both history and its potential closure become perilously bound up with the contingency and disorder that marks nuclear weaponry, even down to the level of individual atoms. Given that Mac Low’s compositional equipment so vividly illustrates this intertwining of randomness and historicity, an effort to situate the “Stein” series in its historical contexts will not only conjure Cold War anxieties about the end of history but also bring into focus randomness’s broader tendency to complicate strategies for historical sense-making. Much as Mac Low’s appropriation of *A Million Random Digits* seeks to redeem the book from its own unhappy origin, so does historical interpretation of his project face the challenge of developing and working with an idea of history as itself shaped by happenstance and contingency. Where historical narratives seem random, they verge on absurdity, lacking the taut sense of causation and necessity that secures the value of historical thinking. If things just happen for no determinate reason and have only the most unstable causal effects upon what follows, what knowledge could we possibly gain from studying what has happened?

Through *A Million Random Digits*, the “Stein” series rehearses a longstanding affiliation among poetry, randomness, and atomic physics—an affiliation that goes back at least to

Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* (50 B.C.E.) presented ancient atomism to a Roman audience.

Lucretius presents his physics in verse, and it includes a seminal concept of randomness, the

clinamen, which refers to the random swerve of atoms through the void. The clinamen helps

Lucretius to explain everything from basic mechanics to free will:

And this, too, understand: when bodies thus
Are borne sheer down through void by their own weight,
At times and points of space unfixed, they swerve
A little from their line, just so much as
That you can mark the change. If 'twere not so
They all would fall just like the drops of rain
Straight through the void: there would have been no clash,
No blow inflicted on the seeds, and so
Had nature ne'er begotten naught at all.

.....
There is another cause of motion there,
Than merely blows and weights: whence we derive
Our power to act: for naught from naught can come.
For weight forbids that all things should be done
By blows of outside force: yet lest the mind
Should feel within a stern necessity
In all it does, and like a conquered thing
Be forced to bear and suffer what it must,
From time to time, at no fixed place these seeds
Swerve from their usual course. (216-224, 285-294)

Many have noted similarities between the Lucretian clinamen and modern atomic physics, especially radioactive decay and Brownian motion. These refer, like the clinamen, to a concept of irreducible physical randomness. Without this randomness in the physical world, scientists would never have needed the RAND Book itself, since their calculations would be strictly deterministic. The clinamen likewise provides a fundamental concept of production, an explanation for why there is something rather than nothing: just by chance. With “no clash / No blow” between swerving atoms, “nature” would have “begotten naught at all.” When materially condensed, Lucretius’ atoms are called seeds (*spermata*, *semina*)—the same reproductive term Mac Low uses for his randomly selected texts.

In philosophy and criticism, the clinamen has proved most influential not by virtue of its ambivalent relation to causation and physical determinacy, but via its equally ambivalent relation to subjective agency and free choice. In a thoroughly deterministic universe, as Lucretius says, “the mind / Should feel within a stern necessity,” and free agency would be at best an illusion. But where physical laws entail indeterminacy, agency can emerge in the interstices opened by randomness.⁷¹ Contrary to the common supposition that chance-operational writing provides the hygiene of an anti-egoic proceduralism, then, the clinamen suggests that randomness provides the very kernel of free agency. Hence, when Mac Low disavows chance’s role in his procedure, calling his work a combination of determinism and “personal” decision, he holds up the expressive product of his process while discounting the supplemental randomness that shapes his compositional practice. Harold Bloom recognizes this logic of agency in *The Anxiety of Influence*, where he calls the clinamen “the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence” (42). Reading the clinamen as a psychological metaphor rather than a principle of metaphysics, Bloom describes “an act of creative correction” by which a poet productively deviates from his influential predecessors (30). Instead of reducing the “Stein” series to such a question about Stein’s influence upon Mac Low’s writing, this chapter provides a thicker sense of the material and intellectual histories that have shaped the poetics of randomness—not least of which, the history of Lucretian physics—and in the process it explores how poems like the “Stein” series complicate the relation between a text’s material and its intellectual historicity.

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Composed long before the Manhattan Project, the Stein texts Mac Low rewrites do not express anxieties about nuclear war, but they do respond to an analogous sense of history as

⁷¹ In modern philosophy, perhaps the most consequential reading of the Epicurean clinamen as a basis for free will appears in Karl Marx’s doctoral dissertation, *The Difference between Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841). This work proved formative for the accommodation of human freedom in Marx’s later materialism.

random. While Stein's critics continue to focus on the more accessible works written before 1911 and after 1915, the Language writers and other experimentalists who consider her an important precursor have focused on the more challenging works from this middle period. Jennifer Ashton describes Stein's "breakthrough texts—*Tender Buttons*, for example," as rejecting lyric expressivity in favor of "a mathematical independence from experience as such." She claims that this mathematical independence "contradicts a prevailing critical view of her work, which sees her interest in the 'liveness' of words as a commitment to 'the poetics of indeterminacy'" (*Modernism* 28). Ashton is right that Stein's work in this period seeks an orderly independence from a chaotic world. *A Million Random Digits* reminds us, however, that mathematics provides an unhappy figure for such orderliness, since numbers have their own forms of disorder. As we have seen, Stein's play with the formal arbitrariness of words does not necessarily bespeak a dedication to the reader's experience of indeterminacy, nor does her investment in aesthetic autonomy mean Stein wholly avoids writing in relation to the world against which her poems define themselves. To think so would elide Stein's frequent recourse to observational rhetoric. Ironically, where Ashton understands Stein's experimental works as pursuing a purified orderliness, others have viewed them as a project of "resistance to 'historical necessity'" (Wagers 23). Under the latter reading, the play of indeterminacy enables Stein to "contest and reform the narrative of necessary historical 'progress,'" insinuating a subversive contingency (28). This chapter parts with such claims by arguing that Stein responds to an idea of history as itself disruptively random, not as a deterministic trap, but it also qualifies Ashton's reading of autonomy by describing Stein's formal play as an assimilation of less threatening kinds of randomness. Rather than wholly dismiss worldly experience as contingent and unreliable, Stein reconsiders what can mean to write a poetry of experience; she reconceives

observational verse as a way of thinking without claiming to know. *Tender Buttons*, for instance, largely avoids making knowledge claims, which would open the text to falsification. Stein's writing of this period is so dedicated to observation that many have compared it to cubist still-life. It does not fully diminish worldly experience, as Ashton claims, but resituates it as a process of thinking the world, thinking language, that does not yield claims to know.

Tender Buttons explores how language can avoid making truth-claims or producing knowledge about the world it presents. Instead of seeing observation as intensified engagement with the world, Stein understands it as a degree-zero of presentational writing—the point where it shows a world without providing knowledge of it.⁷² The book states as much: it is “Claiming nothing, not claiming anything, not a claim in everything, collecting claiming, all this makes a harmony, it even makes a succession” (37). In one sense, the “succession” it makes might be a “harmony” to the world, an accompaniment without intervention. Stein's system of not-claiming also makes a “succession” of presentations. *Tender Buttons* presents a series of thoughts about the objects, food, and rooms it describes, but it does not help us know much about these. Stein draws this limitation herself, as when she provides a vivid description and then avoids saying more about what she has just described:

A SOUND.

Elephant beaten with candy and little pops and
chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats, this is this.
(26)

The tight trochees of “reckless reckless rats” deliver on the heading, but we have as a leftover this inscrutable image of an “Elephant beaten with candy.” Here is the elephant in the room of

⁷² Meyer recognizes Stein's avoidance of knowledge-claims in many works from this period, and he understands this as her response to an overly empiricist scientific discourse: “with *Tender Buttons*...and in hundreds of pieces, large and small, written over the next twenty years,” Stein expresses “a disillusionment with the dominant vision of science...as devoted exclusively to what [William] James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, called ‘knowledge-about’ or descriptive knowledge” (4).

Tender Buttons readings: it is often impossible to know the meaning of its images. There is no hermeneutic for this elephant, and that seems to be the point. The passage's closing casts it as a self-evident simplicity: "this is this." The formulation recalls God's response when Moses asks his name—"I am that I am" (KJV, Exod. 3:14). Both formulations seal themselves within a reflexive self-sufficiency. Neither God nor, it seems, this elephant needs any support from the actually existing world to subsist in its enclosed independence. This rhetoric of enclosure and self-sufficiency abounds in *Tender Buttons* and other Stein works from this period.

Many of the book's most direct statements are in fact non-claims that avoid proffering the knowledge their declarative rhetoric leads us to expect. Such demurrals have two common effects, tautology and absurdity. Both heighten our sense of the text as enclosed in its own self-reference. Stein's tautologies emphasize that her descriptions offer nothing more than description. Hence, when the passage about the elephant closes with "this is this," it indicates that readers cannot expect any knowledge about the imagery's significance. Similarly, in the previous section we read, "There is no pope...A little lace makes boils. This is not true" (25). In fact there was no pope for fourteen days in the year *Tender Buttons* was published, but this statement would have been written late in the papacy of Pius X and would then have been "not true" indeed. The claim that "this is not true" is a form of Russell's paradox: if the statement is true, then it is false, and vice versa. The phrase operates rhetorically as a direct statement, but in fact its paradox encloses it in self-contradiction. Like "this is this," the promise of a direct statement instead intensifies the book's self-enclosure by deepening its refusal to deliver knowledge about the world it describes.

An absurdist humor emerges from the book's avoiding direct claims. The elephant "beaten" with candy—rather than "pelted" or "slightly annoyed"—is absurd in its hyperbole.

Again, here are three sentences that take declarative form but deliver little knowledge: “A canoe is orderly. A period is solemn. A cow is accepted” (46). They show a canoe, a period (whether punctuation, syntactic delay, menstruation, or duration), and a cow. We cannot “accept” these as anything but images, since we have no knowledge of their relation to each other or their own predicates. Even phrases that seem to deliver judgment verge on absurdity, such as the book’s last sentence: “all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain” (78). All of what? Perhaps we should take the book as a recipe for asparagus or a guide to landscape architecture. This absurdism helps to deflate the stakes of disorder within the book, casting randomness as playful and odd instead of distressing. Perhaps Stein happened to eat asparagus beside a fountain that day, and so what? *Tender Buttons* leaves us with this sense of undetermined absurdity, suggesting that at least some of what Stein’s writing does, it does by chance. The very insignificance of this randomness, however, makes it unthreatening and, at times, quite funny.

As Stein discusses it, even thought itself often avoids becoming a matter of knowledge. Suspicions and conjectures remain within their own uncertainty instead of resolving into either conviction or delusion. “Supposing there are bones. There are bones. When there are bones there is no supposing there are bones” (36). Like a mirror image of “this is not true,” these sentences deflate the uncertainties of belief into a mute presence of bones. The nuance and conjecture of knowledge reduces to a self-evidence of thinking. The book’s absurd images emerge as byproducts of Stein’s view of poetic language as an enclosed space to explore the often arbitrary textures of thought. Through this process,

There was a whole collection made. A damp cloth,
an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a
silent star, a single spark, a little movement and the
bed is made. This shows the disorder, it does (68)

Tender Buttons “shows the disorder” of the objects coming to Stein’s attention, but it claims almost nothing about that scattered attention or the knowledge it might produce. By refusing to conjugate these images through a system of knowledge, Stein lends them an absurdist humor, making them an occasion for play rather than for anxiety about the world’s randomness.

Some thirty-four years after *Tender Buttons*, Stein offers more explicit comments on the relation between literary value and the randomness of the historical world. These appear in a short prose piece, “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” (1946), apparently her last writing before her death. Using a vocabulary of “interest,” she describes how value relies upon the pragmatic closure of the frame within which it gets articulated:

They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it. ... What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there is nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. ... Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it’s the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. ... Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. (3-4)

Stein took no “interest” in the bomb because nuclear apocalypse would unsettle all imaginable frames of value, of lived interest. Her observational writing in works like *Tender Buttons* is noted for tracing the chancy configurations of our domestic spaces without ascribing any particular meaning to what appears where. In a similar gesture, the “Reflection” acknowledges the bomb’s contingent power to end human history but ascribes no “interest” to that precariousness, for nuclear conflagration would unsettle human systems of value. Instead Stein advocates a kind of world-historical pragmatism. She responds to historical contingency with a localized notion of “common sense” that sustains her observations of life’s more local materials, and this sensibility relies upon a strategy of weak ignorance, a distancing from too much knowledge. “Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common

sense.” We can safeguard practical systems of interest by turning away from this overflow of worldly information, by seeking alternatives to global knowledge. This relation between value and knowledge opens a novel reading of Stein’s declaration, in *Lucy Church Amiably* (1927; 1930), that “it is very difficult to be interested as you know” (31). The closing “as you know” now appears as the key term; if you do *not* know, or “as you know” less, the commonsense of interest can be recovered. To safeguard this interest, *Tender Buttons* and similar works seek forms of self-enclosure through which they limit their contact with an historical world whose randomness may disrupt attributions of value. Like Mac Low, however, you and I are survivors of a Cold War that reified the possible end of history in the image of a specific technology, the nuclear bomb, and led us to understand its possible deployment as a global game of chance. By reframing Stein’s work in this context, Mac Low explores the possibility of recovering her less anxious relation to randomness—her affirmative interest in local forms of disorder and non-informational data, as opposed to the globalist anxiety about the chaos and contingency of a possible doomsday.

Critics have often associated Stein’s work with various kinds of randomness, but few have recognized that it takes on a characteristic malleability in response to a disordered world—nor that this sense of pliancy constitutes its posture in relation to history. The malleability of Stein’s work opens it to an unusual variety of critical appropriations, without providing clear means of arbitrating between opposite positions. Debates about Stein’s most difficult texts are so diverse that the sole trait everyone can recognize might be their very ability to accommodate conflicting interpretations. Consider the ongoing debate about parts of speech in her poetry. Marjorie Perloff cites Stein’s famous lecture, “Poetry and Grammar,” to argue that for Stein poetry involves ““ridding myself of nouns”” (qtd. in *Modernism* 65), but Jennifer Ashton

disagrees, citing the same lecture to argue that for Stein “poetry is ‘a vocabulary entirely based on the noun’” (68). Perloff wins this round: Stein is “thinking...of conventional poetry” when she stresses nouns, and *Tender Buttons* privileges unusual noun formations to upset conventional nomenclatures (*Modernism* 65). Still, one comes away suspecting that different quotations from the same lecture might elevate prepositions or adverbs. My own reading necessarily operates within the same arbitrariness and, if it is successful, clarifies the role of the random and the arbitrary in Stein’s thinking about the historicity and value of a literary work.⁷³

Close reading does little to stabilize Stein’s malleability, for the selection of evidence often seems arbitrary. In her article on “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,” Sianne Ngai describes the cute object as having “a softness that invites physical touching—or, to use a more provocative verb, fondling”—and she provides evidence of *Tender Buttons*’s cuteness (815). Yet the book also deploys edgier, less comfortable sexual imagery. The short section titled “PEELED PENCIL, CHOKE” simply reads, “Rub her coke” (29). A peeled pencil suggests an exposed penis, and “choke” sounds sadomasochistic. The following line plays on “rub her cock” and “rubber cock”—images more queer than cuddly. The eroticism of “RED ROSES” proves equally gritty: “A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot” (24). Both the section title and the “pink cut pink” suggest a vulva, which then becomes “a collapse” and “a sold hole,” the latter suggesting prostitution. Only by focusing on “less hot” moments does Ngai cast *Tender Buttons* as cute rather than kinky. The book’s capacity to sustain such a diversity of readings may count as its most consequential aesthetic feature.

⁷³ For example, Sianne Ngai begins her essay, “Merely Interesting,” with an epigraph from Stein’s “Henry James,” a short prose work: “But what is the use of being interesting” (777). Ngai does not discuss Stein in relation to interest, but the rhetorical question seems to conflict with my claims about Stein’s interest in preserving interest or value.

Stein's characteristically deflationary gestures shape the erotic imagery of *Tender Buttons* as well, often without making its sense of sexuality more approachable or cuddly. The first section concludes, "A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let" (29). The phrases "jack in" and "meadowed king" connote genitals, and "kill her" suggests the *petite mort*. But all of this "makes a to let"—makes a "toilet" that is only missing "I" to fill the gap. The "to let" is a rental, not a sale. Where "a sold hole" seems darkly erotic, the insertion of "I" into "to let" quite literally yields toilet humor—not kinky, but also not cute. Where *Tender Buttons* offers intimate bathos instead of earnest eroticism, the withering anticlimax of these images should embarrass attempts to privilege any single characteristic of the book except, perhaps, its ability to accommodate a variety of characterizations. The problem is not that nothing sure can be said about *Tender Buttons* and Stein's other work from this period; it's that altogether too much can be said about them. Inasmuch as this malleability has provided unusual leeway for critical appropriations of her work, malleability itself constitutes a strategy for Stein to negotiate her work's vulnerability to historical contingencies, including the contingent range of readings they might occasion in their indefinite futures.

Stein's pursuit of malleability operates as a strategy of historical regard, a way of responding to historical uncertainty, rather than a way of destabilizing either the reader's experience of a text or the writer's expressive production of it. Lisa Siraganian has argued that the pursuit of aesthetic autonomy in Stein's poetry underscores "the *irrelevance* of the response of the reader to the meaning of the text," so for Stein "a poem succeeds as a 'complete thing,'" as unitary and autonomous, "by ignoring the reader" (662). This reader-oriented ignorance strategy illuminates Stein's intellectual contexts, but it does not mean that Stein's poems privilege an inflexible orderliness, as Siraganian and Ashton claim. Rather, Stein pursues textual

malleability—not in the name of reader-oriented indeterminacy but as a mode of historical regard by which she inoculates her work against a more disruptive sense of historical randomness. Stein’s malleability may thus recall Marjorie Perloff’s notion of a “poetics of indeterminacy,” but their differences are important. Reading Stein’s malleability as a mode of historical regard calls into question, instead of privileging, the specific narratives of literary inheritance that Perloff emphasizes.⁷⁴ Instead, Stein’s malleability acknowledges that any narrative of literary influence unfolds under the same conditions of historical contingency to which Stein responds in her poetry. Instead of cementing a poem within a given historical context or literary tradition, it enables Stein to negotiate the uncertainties of those historical relations themselves. Where Stein’s malleability enables a poetic closure that complicates her poems’ historical uptake, we leave behind the conventional distinction in which “closed” poems appeal to order and local intimacies against world-historical context, while “open” poems exhibit flexibility and disorder through contact with the actual, historical world.

Ngai lists cuteness among a set of minor aesthetic categories by which artworks “bear witness to their contingency in a more explicit, even self-evident way” than conventional aesthetics would allow (811). Whereas beauty suggests a susceptibility to blemishes, sublimity a brittleness in relation to passing time, the cute object’s pliancy makes it durable: “smallness and blobbishness suggests greater malleability” and thus a “capacity to withstand rough handling” (816, 829). By virtue of its resiliency, cuteness bolsters “art’s capacity for offering some resistance to its rhythmic recuperation by becoming...slightly less easy to consume” or destroy

⁷⁴ Even before Perloff, critics had cited Stein’s disorder to situate her in a literary-historical order. In an article on “Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist” (1974), Neil Schmitz praises Michael Hoffman for perceiving that Stein’s work “discloses a chaos beyond its mute signs,” but he disparages how Hoffman “establishes his own center...and then circumlocutes his own mystification” (1206). Yet Schmitz reproduces the error, affirming that “everything is contingent” in *Tender Buttons*, praising its “attempt to manifest the arbitrariness of” language, yet assuming such contingency signifies nascent postmodernism and not, say, a forbidding sense of a text’s historicity.

(834). The cute object's malleability enables it to absorb and recover from antagonism of multiple kinds. This stylistics of resiliency has enabled a variety of avant-gardists to position their work in relation to an often forbidding or threatening historical world they cannot expect to change—hence the cute object's diminutive, helpless air. Alongside her readings of *Tender Buttons*, Ngai discusses the famously cute work of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, who often places cute figures in “a sinister or implicitly menacing environment” (822). Ngai and others see the cartoonish mushrooms in Murakami's work as “recalling the mushroom clouds of the atomic bombs” dropped on Japan. Instead of strongly defensive responses to such historical violence, which would make the artwork pathetically powerless, a malleable cuteness helps artworks absorb the violent impacts of historical accidents without becoming damaged or undone. In the same way, the malleability of Stein's work helps it to absorb and recover from the disruptiveness of being historical, instead of withering at the prospect of historicity. A more brittle posture in relation to history would have yielded poetry less open to such a wide variety of interpretations, yet this hermeneutic “openness,” this flexibility, itself constitutes a strategy of closure against the disruption of historical context. In this way, malleability sustains Stein's weak ignorance in relation to history: it enables a demurral from historical knowledge, yet instead of crumbling in the face of random historical developments, it also absorbs and accommodates the variety of responses it occasions.

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Despite the chancy, unintentional procedure for their composition, the “Stein” poems often seem to express anxiety about the interface between randomness and historicity. Where Stein's “Reflection” counsels a poised approach to historical contingency itself, Mac Low's rewritings worry that the randomness of what happens will destructively unsettle our frameworks

for ascribing value—including, the “Stein” series seems to imply, the aesthetic value we attribute to Stein’s work and Mac Low’s. This more anxious view of randomness finds expression in the opening stanzas of “Who is Showing Us What Happened in This Corner? (Stein 103)”:

Who is showing us this unordered spectacle?
They are recklessly making exchanges.

Not likely in the closet, she connects singing with a message.
He does not like to show himself singing in the closet there.
Hanging in it sooner, for no side is established there.

Suppose her cloak is spread.
A single cane is attractive.
When a white stamp stops being shown, it becomes increasingly fitting.
Housing and shows preserve their patients.
Pack some lead-colored glasses.

No stone loses the inclination to be shown.
Isn't it the same as any sign at a spectacle?
No spectacle makes a season.
She strokes wood on the spot as a charm.
Between stomachs the lightening lace is reckless and did less.
No dog needs to be wearing lace at the wrist in the summer.
Doesn't the nearest spot show?

These lines prove that punctuation in the “Stein” series is Mac Low’s. The poem’s source text, *Tender Buttons*, does not contain a single question mark, but “Stein 103” has twelve. Of course, Stein’s book contains plenty of questions: “Nickel, what is nickel,” for instance, or “Does this change” (9-10). But by omitting question marks, Stein substantializes the questions themselves; they read more as assertions of a question than as solicitations of an answer. In this sense, Mac Low’s question marks have a diacritical function. As in Stein’s text, syntax alone suffices to mark his questions as such, so the question marks indicate a subtle anxiety not evident in the source materials. This structure of anxiety feeds upon itself. It seems to arise as an expression of concern that Mac Low’s work might respond to disorder and contingency differently than Stein, and it is precisely this anxiety about Mac Low’s deviation that constitutes the difference it

worries about. Already in line one, the “not unordered” spectacle that opens *Tender Buttons* has become “this unordered spectacle.” Stein’s recessively assertive double-negative carries a calm assuredness; I might say her book is “not unordered” in the same way that my desk is not a total mess. Mac Low’s intentionless procedure, by contrast, yields a more overtly “unordered spectacle,” yet one that seems capable of discussing its own disorder. The opening line also articulates a “who?” through which Mac Low expresses anxieties about showing and being shown—about the exposure involved in his “reckless exchanges” with Stein. Despite his emphasis upon determinism, he seems to worry about rewriting Stein recklessly—and, moreover, to worry about worrying too much, precisely the anxiety trap Stein avoids. This anxiety redoubles as the poem conjugates “show” through various tenses. In the first two stanzas, “show” is an active, transitive verb: one shows an audience (“us”) a spectacle, or one shows oneself. In stanza three, however, the past participle and plural noun suggest a passive visibility rather than active unveiling. This passivity is fully expressed in the opening of stanza four, where “No stone loses its inclination to be shown.” Perhaps no stone loses this inclination because no stone has any inclination, any volition, at all. Showing thus becomes something one does to a passive object, like putting a stone on an incline. It has no choice but to roll, or to be shown, much as Stein cannot keep Mac Low from making an “unordered spectacle” of her work. Of course, Stein takes no “interest” in her work’s exposure to one possible future or another, for she has died. In the “Stein” poems Mac Low negotiates anxieties about the randomness of his rewritings, anxieties about how such disorder shapes the literary and political histories that stand between the two writers and enable us to think their continuities. If readers share Mac Low’s concerns about the effects of randomness upon historical interpretation, then we may exchange Stein’s poised response to historical contingency for Mac Low’s more anxious defensiveness.

Even as chance provides a basis for their production, many of the “Stein” poems view randomness as a threat to their own integrity and value. They often praise necessity and order, therefore, and oppose themselves to a chaotic outside. “Stein 160” declares that “Every part is connected with the others” (23), evoking an articulated system of causes and effects. Similarly, “Stein 1” describes a “pleasant pressure. / The whispering necessity pressure”—perhaps referring to the rules of the diastic procedure itself as a “pleasant” rubric for the writing (14-15). In one of the longest pieces in the series, “Stein 32,” we encounter several praises of necessity and order: we read that “time shows necessity” (222), that “necessity was dearest” (30), and that “All time clears excess samples nicely” (72). Given Mac Low’s process of “sampling” from Stein, these lines voice a wish that determinism and order will sweep away the “excess” of a chaotic world. Alongside these encomia to order, the “Stein” poems also express anxiety that rational order might lapse. Hence, “Stein 100” worries about the “consequences monstrous” that stem from its activity, and the same poem worries that “Reason is sullenness” and that we might see “Reason’s season cracked” (8, 17, 65). In accordance with Mac Low’s marginalization of chance in his descriptions of the diastic procedure, the “Stein” series as a whole expresses a dedication to necessity and an anxiety about the world’s randomness.

In “Stein 103,” Mac Low’s defensive response to historical contingency emerges through a rhetoric of negation more forceful than Stein’s negatives tend to be. *Tender Buttons* often uses negative words to make positive assertions, as when “not unordered in not resembling” means “orderly and self-sufficient.” Only two negations in “Stein 103” work in this assertive way; these are the rhetorical questions in stanza four, “Isn’t it the same” and “Doesn’t the nearest spot show.” These recall Stein’s assertive use of negation and interrogative syntax. Most of Mac Low’s negations, by contrast, cannot be recuperated into affirmative statements. Instead his

poem tells of what is “Not likely,” of what “He does not like,” and of “this unordered spectacle.” Through this rhetorical shift, Mac Low displaces Stein’s subtle interplay between negation and assertion, replacing it with a defensive posture toward the anxieties his rewriting itself occasions. This anxious tone draws me most strongly to a line in “Stein 103” I have not yet mentioned, the command that closes stanza three: “Pack some lead-colored glasses.” The sufficiently paranoid reader will see these not as lead-colored drinking glasses but as lead-colored spectacles, eyeglasses. And what would leaden eyeglasses provide, if not a shield from radiation? If we had them, these spectacles might help us to view Mac Low’s rewriting free from anxiety about the historical randomness through which his relation to Stein is mediated—might help us toward a less anxious way of relating to history’s contingency, one that Stein herself models in the “Reflection” and elsewhere. As it stands, however, Mac Low sets up defensive strategies for coping with history’s randomness—by repudiating chance operations, for instance, and agonizing about “unordered spectacle” in the poems themselves. He leaves it for the reader to ask what literary and political developments lead from Stein’s reparative view of history to Mac Low’s anxious defensiveness.

This is a question about historical transit, about the lineages of experimental writing that get us from Stein’s relatively placid view of historical contingency to Mac Low’s more anxious response, and back again. The answer might first cast Mac Low’s chance operations as an inheritance from such European avant-gardists as Mallarmé, Duchamp, Perec, Queneau, and Breton. Indeed, the expatriate Gertrude Stein looms large in standard narratives about the American absorption of European experimentalism. But the equipment mediating her exchange with Mac Low is the product of a specifically US military-industrial history. The RAND Book reminds us that American writers absorb aesthetics of disorder from multiple sources, and among

these is the sense of contingency associated with atomic weapons, a precariousness under which American writing had already been playing out. The search for an explicitly US lineage of chance writing might upset the normal ways in which a literary work becomes marked as national and in which nationality informs constructions of literary history. There are hints of proceduralism and chance operations in some of Stein's work—the exhaustive categorization of *The Making of Americans*, for instance, or *Tender Buttons*'s descriptions of whatever happens to be lying around—but Stein does not employ the explicitly procedural or stochastic techniques of Mac Low and the OuLiPo.⁷⁵ Stein declared that “America is my country and Paris is my home town,” but she does not provide an anchor for US poets' use of chance operations per se (*American* 59). The RAND Book instead insinuates less convenient forms of poetic inheritance and literary nationality. If a poem is composed at random, perhaps its system of literary influences becomes contingent or arbitrary, instead of concretizing chance writing as a necessarily French dispensation. And if chance writing's national marking can arrive through a military reference volume, such poetry might position itself in relation to a militaristic, imperial sense of the national instead of pursuing a comfortable cosmopolitanism. Many of the Language writers and related experimentalists see themselves as socio-politically liberative, anti-imperial, and pacifist, but through the “Stein” poems, the equipment of US nuclear armament and capitalist imperialism intrudes upon this tradition, clashing with its political commitments. Still, the RAND Book provides only random digits, so perhaps it does not mark its intertexts with its own history. Its disordering energies seem to detach historical linkages, but as equipment for poetry, the book continually insinuates the militarism its national significance entails.

⁷⁵ On Stein and automatic or unintentional writing, see Skinner's famous essay and Meyer's commentary on it (221-29).

Without strongly refuting the story of transatlantic influence, then, one might also locate the “Stein” series within a lineage of US poetry about nuclear armament and Cold War anxiety—or within an even longer US tradition of taking the atomic as a cypher for national identity. As early as the third line of Whitman’s 1855 “Song of Myself,” we read that “every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you” (63). Lest we think this a passing reference, Mark Noble has traced Whitman’s fascination with atomic science, arguing that the atomic embodies for Whitman “the pure democracy and thus broad possibility that are both inherent in and constitutive of nature”—and, of course, key to the US political imaginary from Whitman’s day to our own (253). Mina Loy affiliates Stein with atomic science as early as 1924, calling her “Curie / ... of vocabulary.” Stein welcomed such comparisons, saying in *Everybody’s Autobiography* that “Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind of the century” (22). The affiliation of US culture with the atomic remains strong into the 1950s, when we read Allen Ginsberg, “listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox” (11). Between then and now, many poets would share what John Berryman called “the night sweats & the day sweats” over the “radioactive” global conflict (55). In 1973, Robert Hass further involved Stein with anxieties about nuclear war by titling a collection of her unpublished writings *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, after the short prose piece discussed above. Even as we understand Mac Low’s procedural reworking of Stein as part of a transatlantic lineage of experimental writing, his unusual compositional equipment also makes visible less obvious lines of influence and historical motifs in US poetry.

In this way, perhaps, the RAND Book begins to endow its literary products with its own destabilizing energies. As this attempt at a nonce genealogy of “atomic” American poetry should suggest, efforts to produce historical continuity can easily generate paranoiac narratives of

overdetermined causation and unlikely convergence. Historical narratives become difficult, for example, when confronted with a tradition of writers whose unity stems from a shared interest in chance operations as a means of decontextualizing their work historically. If avenues of literary-historical influence nevertheless remain open, even when poets view their methods as subversive of dominant historical and political orders, then how might such attempts to write outside of history solicit a different kind of historical reading? Similarly, when a procedural technique involves equipment as historically fraught as *A Million Random Digits*, it may become involved in another series of histories—including consummately unliterary histories—by way of the very equipment for a procedure assumed to destabilize and decouple historical relations. Still more problematically, making historical sense of the “Stein” series tends to heighten rather than resolve the historical paranoia that envelops these texts—first, by energizing the discourse of anxiety about nuclear war and, second, by casting the apparent randomness of the historical narratives the “Stein” poems solicit as a destabilizing threat from which steadier forms of historical thought should recoil. Such paranoid responses can be avoided by viewing the relation between Stein and Mac Low not as a question about the histories from which Mac Low’s work emerges but as a question about Stein’s futurity. When the “Stein” poems appear as an image of Stein’s own work in the future of its reception, they operate as *readings* of Stein, readings that seek to recuperate from her a less anxious and defensive way of responding to the randomness of what happens.

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The “Stein” poems operate primarily as readings of Stein not because they contain critical discourse in the normative sense—far from it—but because they respond to and transform our view of their source materials, making explicit the necessary horizon for historical

interpretation of both Stein's texts and Mac Low's responses. We find precedence for treating the "Stein" poems as readings both in Mac Low's own commentary and in the broader commitments of the Language movement to which he contributed. Indeed, if his decision to rewrite Stein in particular seems unsurprising, this is because he and other Language writers have long viewed her as an important precursor. The December 1978 issue of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* includes a section called "Reading Stein," in which several writers reflect upon an excerpt from *Tender Buttons*. There Mac Low describes how "hearing the sounds" of Stein's text leads him to "go from word to word" instead of reading synthetically, a process echoed in the word-by-word counting of his procedure. As we have seen, he refers to the procedure itself as "diastic reading" and "reading-through text-selection." Though the resulting texts do not explicitly advance critical claims about Stein, the rhetoric of reading suffuses Mac Low's engagement with his predecessor. Such rhetoric is more than a poetic conceit; it opens the "Stein" series onto its literary-historical contexts as a late exemplar of Language writing and as an index of Stein's reputation.

For Mac Low and other Language writers, the readerly approach to textual composition has sustained strategies to abandon traditional ideas of poetic expression and has intensified the sense of a poem as historical. In short, a readerly Language poem often seems less like a notional lyric and more like an historical document. As Jed Rasula puts it, "to be a reader is to be the willing receptor of transformative agencies destined to either alter or confirm one's position in a social circuitry" (53). The Language group is of course broad and multifarious, but many of its poems, including Mac Low's, bespeak a conviction that "Language is one strategic part of the total social fact" (Silliman, "Writing" 167). A poem of this sort does not record individual invention or intimate expression but reflects part of a broader social order. If it bears a personal

relation to its author, it does so not by disclosing her subjective interiority but by reflecting her “*positionality* within the total, historical, social fact.” In a late commentary written for a collection of Language texts, Mac Low casts this readerly, depersonalizing impulse as a welcome alternative to lyric expressivism. At first, he carefully notes that his late work often has involved his personal touch. Soon, though, he describes his “motive for the use of chance” as a will to produce texts “relatively ‘uncontaminated’ by the composer’s ‘ego,’” and he avows that “it was such a relief to stop making artworks carry that burden of ‘expression’!” (26) When a poem no longer provides a vehicle for lyrical expression, it increasingly seems like a kind of historical trace—a mnemonic mechanism that reflects the linguistic textures of the social reality from which it emerged. As Ron Silliman puts it, “the work of each poet, each poem, is a response to a determinate coordinate of language and history” (“Disappearance” 127). Indeed, the “Stein” poems accomplish nothing if not a linguistic coordination of a specific literary history, the lineage that made Stein an obvious choice for Mac Low’s rewritings. And to read them in relation to his chance operations is to evoke other histories that likewise seem at once overdetermined and arbitrary—among these, the long history of chance operations as a poetic technique and the material history of his chance-operational equipment as a military device. Nevertheless, we have seen that the “Stein” poems do retain an expressive, even lyrical impulse as they voice a series of anxieties about the historical relations they evoke, especially relations with Stein’s work. In voicing such anxieties about the interface between randomness and historicity, then, the “Stein” series reminds us, first, that randomness is not simply anathema to historical thinking but in fact shapes historical relations themselves and, second, that chance operations and related procedures do not necessarily cleanse a text of expressive lyricism so thoroughly as one might assume.

Lynn Hejinian returns to the distinction between “open” and “closed” poetry in order to track this interplay of lyric expression and historicity. She refers to both Stein and Mac Low in this light. In *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), she frequently positions Stein as an alternative to “the coercive, epiphantic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry...with its smug pretention to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as a guardian to Truth” (41). She reads Stein’s middle period, including the texts Mac Low rewrites, as pursuing an “impassioned realism” that emphasizes language’s invocational and descriptive powers (105). In “The Rejection of Closure,” meanwhile, she argues that “a ‘closed text’ is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it,” but in composing an “open” text “the writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive” (42-3). The “open” text, in other words, rejects the myths of lyric closure, aesthetic autonomy, and organic unity in favor of a polysemy of meaning and lively exchanges with contemporary and historical contexts. Hejinian’s claims characterize the predominant opinions of the Language poets, the most notable group to claim Stein as a forerunner, and they require qualification because they overlook the extent to which Stein’s purportedly “open” texts in fact seek an autonomy from the disorder of the actual world that would disrupt their sense of value or “interest.” By the same token, Mac Low’s purportedly “open” writing more keenly perceives its contact with the historical world, but it does not for that reason eschew conventional modes of expression—quite the contrary.

As the anxious self-references of “Stein 103” reveal, in the “Stein” series a surprisingly lyrical expressivism emerges from the very procedures expected to undercut such expression. In this way, Mac Low reconsiders how ostensibly post-lyrical writing organizes relations among poetic expression, randomness, and historicity. In “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject,”

Marjorie Perloff avers, “One of the cardinal principles—perhaps the cardinal principle of American Language poetics...has been the dismissal of ‘voice’ as the foundational principle of lyric poetry” (129). Perloff suggests a theory of “signature” to describe a poet’s singular style after “the demise of the ego, of the transcendental self.” However, in Mac Low’s case at least, lyric expression emerges not in relation to an authorial signature, but out of the very procedures expected to undercut expression. Because Mac Low’s texts voice anxieties about their own exposure to and production of randomness, the subject of lyric expression in his work worries about what might displace the expressive subject itself. As we see in the anxious expressions of the “Stein” poems, a poem that leaves itself open to the disordered historical world can in fact prove more expressive than poems that, like Stein’s, seek forms of enclosure. In this way, Mac Low invites a reconsideration of how the lyric genre organizes relations among expressive speech, openness or closure, and historicity. The series’ paranoid voice marks a generic difference from Stein—whose more relaxed response to contingency indicates a more earnest departure from conventional strategies for managing meaning and value—and its anxious responses to randomness denote an unsteady sense of generic and literary-historical position. Hence, the expressive strain in his work does not simply reassert old generic norms but highlights the necessary instability of any grounds for valuing a poem and understanding its historical contexts.

Although Mac Low does not claim his works fully banish personal expression, some critics have argued that his chance operations and rule-based procedures should tend to limit such expression. The poet’s son, Mordecai-Mark Mac Low, argues that “a main theme running through” his father’s work “is an attempt to develop the Buddhist idea/ideal of egoless expression.” Likewise, in an article on “The Limits of Formalism,” Ellen Zweig argues that Mac

Low's "Buddhist/Taoist attitude of chance methodology" helps him "to get rid of the ego" and cleanse his writing of "habitual associations which arise from personal history." Chance operations for her "are another way away from one culture to a more universal culture... They take us away from our Western preoccupation with causality and time sequence" (85). This idea of anti-egoic writing bears significant attraction for critics, despite the fact that Mac Low did not understand spiritualist aesthetics as entailing a diminution of personal expression. For those who do see procedural writing as eroding normal forms of expression, it promises a way of intervening upon aesthetico-political norms. Jennifer Scappettone's article on Mac Low's historicism discusses his rewritings of Ezra Pound's cantos, in *Words and Ends from Ez* (1989), and she argues that they "possess curious critical force" despite Mac Low's procedural method (188). Scappettone claims that the "ego-trammeling, choral outbreak" of Mac Low's rewriting "displaces Pound's imperious personhood" with a "lyricizing" voice (205, 189). Thus, she argues, Mac Low reconfigures the historical image of his source, helping us to reexamine Pound's fascism. Zweig and Scappettone perceive that by unsettling the causative power of historical contexts, chance operations complicate a poem's relation to history, but as Scappettone's discussion of a "lyricizing" impulse indicates, the expressive voice supposedly banished in Language writing remains operative in the "Stein" poems and similar projects. In fact, Mac Low's most powerful explorations of randomness do not negate lyric expression so much as they trace its persistence, as a structure of anxiety about this same relation between randomness and historicity.

Current discussions of "conceptual writing" perpetuate this assumption that procedural or chance-operational methods will minimize personal expression or abolish lyrical sentiment from a poem. In his introduction to the anthology *Against Expression* (2011), Craig Dworkin dedicates

the book to showcasing “works fundamentally opposed to ideologies of expression”—as if expression and, indeed, ideology were not fundamental to the possibility of experience per se, but could simply be discarded at will (xliii). The conceptual poets have produced some extraordinarily interesting texts—one of which, produced by Dworkin’s co-editor, Kenneth Goldsmith, is discussed in the following chapter—but existing exegeses of their work are often specious. They are seduced by the aim to be “aggressively unexpressive and resolutely nonsubjective” (xxxix). The exegetes of conceptualism do not recognize that to dissolve expression would be to dissolve language per se, and to outstrip subjectivity can mean passing either into madness or beyond the coordinates of livable experience itself. Moreover, the conceptualist attempt to challenge “the self-regard of narcissistic confession...in favor of laying bare the potential for linguistic self-reflexiveness” is far from radical for poetry, even lyric poetry (xliii). We have known at least since Paul de Man that the romantic lyric often engages the play of “linguistic self-reflexiveness” in order to test the boundary of subjective expression. More recent criticism about reticence and reparativity suggests that if the conceptualist editor values “work that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies and that, moreover, refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism, reticence, obliquity, and modes of noninterference,” then such an editor need look no further than nineteenth-century lyricists like Dickinson and Wordsworth (xliii-xliv).⁷⁶ When an expressive voice of anxiety emerges from the “Stein” poems, therefore, Mac Low demonstrates that the procedural toolkit he shares with current conceptual writing cannot be expected to cleanse a poem of its subjective content—and might, to the contrary, enable and sustain such expression. Nevertheless, the exegetes of conceptualism mark a fascinating moment

⁷⁶ Cf. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984) and Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (2007).

in the afterlives of the lyric genre, for they coordinate conceptualist work through an all-too-insistent opposition to the very precepts of traditional lyricism that it purportedly abandons, revealing the lyric genre's continued power to shape work that seeks most ardently to leave it behind.

Mac Low acknowledges randomness's power to depersonalize a compositional process, but by mixing chance operations with deterministic procedures and "personal" decisions, he aims not to cleanse his writing of all personal expression but to involve the matters of chance and determinism in a scene of production normally viewed as the province of authorial will. Discussing his differences from John Cage, he writes, "There isn't such an overwhelming emphasis on nonegoity in mine" ("Response"). In an interview with Charles Bernstein, he acknowledges the political suggestiveness of his methods when he describes "free writing versus unfree writing," but for him both determinist and chance operations count as "unfree" and lack political attraction. "I don't think the use of non-intentional methods has much relation to left-libertarian...emancipatory politics." Mac Low resists Bernstein's repeated invitations to make political claims for his procedures; he instead insists that "insofar as there's a politics" in his work, "it's in the performance pieces," since the performer "freely choosing" actions provides an "analogue of a free society." By this view, the RAND Book complicates historical reading not by insinuating an artifact of militaristic imperialism in the anarchic aesthetic of chance operations, but by insisting upon the functional *ambivalence* of a chance operation vis-à-vis any material history of its equipment or any possible historical matrix from which an expression of political will might emerge. Like a rifle or a bomb, in other words, an aesthetics of chance is neither inherently radical and destabilizing nor inherently supportive of political hegemony and state

power; it is as ambivalent in relation to political positions and historical contexts as it is to any expressive utterance that might issue despite, alongside, or indeed through a randomized process.

By the same token, for Mac Low any political value in the “Stein” poems stems not from their chance or deterministic procedures but from their latent expressivism. Discussing his methods with Andrew Levy, he uses spiritual terms to note the importance of personal expression for political signification:

I come up with this kabbalistic idea of “saving the sparks.” Saving the sparks is saving the creator’s spirit—or whatever you want to call it—that was in shells, broken and scattered across the earth...something like that is happening when one uses a book that was composed for some horrible reason. I’ve used the Rand Corporation’s table *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*...I have often felt that when I used the random-digit book, I was somehow saving sparks; you know, these people were good mathematicians, yet they were putting their spirit into these military projects.

In a similar context, Scappettone interprets Mac Low’s aim of “freeing the sparks” as a reference to Pound’s poetic archaeology in the *Cantos* (192). When Mac Low discusses Pound’s fascism with Bernstein, he argues that “the method used” to rewrite the *Cantos* “purges all that nonsense out of his invention,” redeeming Pound’s work from his fascism. Mac Low thus seems to invest procedural writing with two contradictory functions. On one hand, he believes non-intentional procedures hold the redemptive power to cleanse a text of its unhappy historical entanglements—Pound’s pro-fascist convictions, for instance, or the “horrible reason” for creating the RAND Book. Yet he seeks to recover the very productive “spark” whose historical specificity he had hoped to submerge.

The “Stein” series compresses this double motivation, for Mac Low directs his redemptive aspiration not at the poet he rewrites, not at Stein, but at the “spirit” of the scientists who created the equipment for the rewriting procedure. In her present station as an avant-garde saint, Stein hardly needs redemption, but the challenging Stein texts that Mac Low rewrites were

largely ridiculed until the Language writers of the 1970s and the feminist critics of the 1980s elevated them. Mac Low could have presented the “Stein” series as a continuation of these efforts to redeem Stein’s experimentalism—as a rebuttal, for instance, against recent historicist claims that her lesbianism was relatively heteronormative, her Jewishness tempered by a “Vichy collaboration,” her aesthetic radicalism embarrassed by the wealth and class that gave her the luxury to experiment—but Mac Low does not respond to such considerations.⁷⁷ Perhaps he feels himself already too much within the historical development of her reputation. Instead of destabilizing the historical specificities of Stein’s work, his chance operations provide a further formation of the historical chances that have brought Stein and Mac Low together within a trajectory of American experimentalism and, indeed, within a single series of poems. By responding to such historical anxieties with a recuperative care for the production of the equipment through which he and Stein meet, Mac Low recognizes randomness not merely as destabilizing in relation to literary and political histories but as simultaneously formative of those histories in the first place. Through the RAND Book, randomness no longer appears as an unapproachable other of historical knowledge but instead makes itself available as a positive support for various kinds of knowledge-production—as a principle of mathematics or physics, as a method of aesthetic production, and ultimately as a way to approach historical meanings beyond strict causalism.

The concept of randomness in Mac Low’s work, then, does not radically disrupt historical interpretation any more than it blocks the emergence of an expressive voice. Quite the contrary, the “Stein” series positions randomness as a basis for thinking through the relation between historical change and assignments of value. We have already seen randomness operate

⁷⁷ Among many others, Berry, Chessman, DeKoven, and Stimpson address Stein and feminism. On her lesbianism, see Cope, Kent, and Stimpson; on her domesticity, Blair, Davis, and Watson. On Stein’s Jewishness, see Damon; on her Vichy relationships and Zionism, Van Dusen and Will.

as a copula between historical thought and valuation in Stein's discussion of the atomic bomb, and the same structure appears in critical discussions of Mac Low. In his attack upon the value of Mac Low's work, for instance, Brett Bourbon coordinates the relation between contingency and value differently than the "Stein" poems would have us do. He begins an essay called "What Is a Poem?" by quoting a few lines from *Words and Ends from Ez*, the rewriting of Pound, which he says he dislikes because "it is not poetry" (28). His essay endeavors to "explain how we can read the concept of a poem by reading a poem," and he objects to Mac Low's work because it does not convey an idea of what a poem is (27). He links this point with a broader concern about cultural critics who advance "the idea that poetry is nothing more than 'a name for a changeable set of desires and cultural ambitions'" (28). Judgments of value, according to Bourbon, vitiate the forms of historical accident that such cultural relativism supposedly privileges:

If it is true that every perspective is historically, that is, culturally and contingently, determined, then what choice do we have but to do what we do?...If we must judge the contingency, either we judge our own contingent entanglement relative to our prejudices or relative to some further idea of what is good....If we can make judgments, we are not merely historically determined. (31)

Bourbon sustains the conventional opposition between value-judgment as a fiat of agentic rationalism and, on the other hand, the prison-house of relativism that would leave us overdetermined by our contingent historical positions. While the "Stein" poems do express anxiety about the "contingent entanglement" of value-judgments and historical contexts, they respond to this conundrum in a more flexible and productive way. Bourbon holds that a judgment bracketed within the historically contingent frame from which it emerges would be no judgment at all, so we can disregard such contingency's formative pressures on assignments of value—can and indeed must, if Bourbon's absolutist concept of judgment is to remain coherent. By contrast, the "Stein" series attempts a reparative response to the randomly destabilized

linkages between a text's historicity and its value. Where Bourbon seeks to bracket historical contingencies as threatening to the discourse of value, Mac Low explores this problem of historical anxiety itself and imagines a recuperative form of valuation that might prove less brittle in the face of historical randomness.

* * *

How, then, can a judgment of value be made about the "Stein" poems themselves, especially where these work as readings of Stein's originals? They may become valued simply by virtue of their relation to Stein, but that relation is precisely the kind of historical ligament whose complications the "Stein" poems explore. Hence, one major value of the "Stein" series lies in making explicit the difficulties of its own valuation and the broader complexities of value in light of historical randomness.

For both Stein and Mac Low, randomness provides a figure for the uncertainties inherent in historical thought, but their postures in relation to this necessary historiological ignorance are quite different. Stein's assimilative posture toward randomness positions poetic language as a mode of thought that does not produce or support knowledge. She offers a poised response to even the most dangerous avatar of historical precariousness, the atomic bomb. Instead of viewing randomness as a troubling uncertainty, she argues that our mediatized cultures provide us *too much* information—a chaos of information, we might say—and that a more local and quotidian "common sense" will secure the discourse of value even if we live in the most "interesting" times. By contrast, Mac Low's rewritings respond to this historical vulnerability through a figure of lyric expression that voices anxiety about its position within random historical contexts. Mac Low's expressive voice appears as a barred object for his poetry's generic desires. Contrary to frequent claims that Language writing and related experimentalisms offer positive alternatives to

a lyrical norm seen as retrograde and lapsed, Mac Low explores what forms of lyric expressivity still lurk within a writing practice that overridingly engages language as a mechanism for procedural manipulations. In his pursuit of a reading practice that might recuperate Stein's less anxious posture, he suggests that such latent expressivism may in fact be central to his poetics and, perhaps, to other writing that seems at first to liquidate old generic modes altogether.

A Million Random Digits provides a lynchpin for the historical problematic that unfolds between Stein and Mac Low. This strange compositional equipment arrives as both a force of genuine randomness and a significant historical trace. By providing both constitutive disorder and historical context, it positions randomness as not necessarily opposed to history, but as opening modes of historical relation. As a model for reading poetry through its compositional equipment, *A Million Random Digits* makes at least two additional contributions to contemporary new media poetics. First, the word "digits" in its title reminds us that projects for reading "digital poetry" need to clarify the encounter with digits per se. There is little consensus about the forms of ideality, determinacy, or exactitude that obtain in mathematical discourse, especially in mathematical discussions of randomness, infinity, and zero. The seeming absoluteness of the RAND Book's numerical disorder might undermine efforts to position the text itself within any determinate historical context, since such relations would be totally accidental with regards to the actual numbers in the book. A clearer sense of when mathematical absolutism does or does not obtain will be an important question for future work in "digital" poetics.

Second, the RAND Book's role as an apparatus of chance and disorder serves as a reminder that not all scenes of digital composition or machine reading are informatical. Most current models of machine reading understand computer processes and equipment as providing

access to positively given information—often to large amounts of raw, numerical data—that computers help us compile and manipulate. By contrast, Mac Low’s use of *A Million Random Digits* shows that digital equipment sometimes provides an absence or disordering of information. Our creative and critical relations to computers unfold through frustration, uncertainty, improvisation, and befuddlement just as often as they do through a fully knowing instrumentalism, but we do not yet have comparable models for reading these less orderly, less informatical roles for our digital equipment. What might it mean to look at a computer or a book of digits not as a knowledge engine but as a mechanism for forgetting and not-knowing—or as a machine that can think but not know? Such a reconfiguration of digital humanities in relation to the economies of knowledge they produce will improve our understanding of how we write, read, and live with digital machines.

The primary value of the “Stein” poems, however, lies in their power to resituate the idea of historical reading. By illuminating the relation between history and various forms of randomness, they show that indeterminacy in Mac Low’s work and Stein’s should not be seen primarily as concretizing a specific lineage of avant-garde writing, since such randomness solicits a whole range of historical affiliations and deferrals. Mac Low’s poems also show that neither he nor Stein understands randomness simply as a means of turning away from history or disrupting an historical order, and they thereby suggest that other chance-operational writing might likewise take up unexpectedly nuanced postures in relation to history. For Mac Low and Stein, various forms of randomness in fact structure a text’s relation to history and to its own historicity. Randomness, in other words, reveals how historical thought is imbricated with its own forms of ignorance, reminding us that historical relations themselves can be undecidable and accidental without for that reason becoming less consequential. Such historical ignorance

opens itself to recuperative readings: because randomness cannot provide a means of turning away from a concept of history itself understood as random, historical thought arrives as knowledge recuperated within an inevitably random world. Through these readings that the “Stein” poems produce, the question of randomness supplements historicist hermeneutics with a description of Stein’s and Mac Low’s poetics—of the generic, aesthetic, and formal commitments that enable their writing. Far from dehistoricizing their work, such a poetics would itself provide modes of historical regard by clarifying, for instance, the afterlives of lyric expression in Language writing or in chance-operational texts. The difficult relation between historicity and randomness does not, therefore, set a strong limit on projects of historical inquiry or argue that historiological discourse is necessarily arbitrary. Instead it helps to describe the uncertainties, instabilities, and recuperative futures through which we think the histories of a chaotic world.

Chapter 3. Making Strangers with Friends: The Anonymous Lyricism of Frank O'Hara

Early in his short career, Frank O'Hara wrote a poem that now seems a prescient reflection on the reputation he and his writing have enjoyed. His friend Kenneth Koch dates the poem to 1949 or 1950, years before O'Hara moved to New York City and took his place at the center of the postwar artistic scene that so famously swirled around him. The poem, called "Autobiographia Literaria," would not appear in print until 1967, the year after O'Hara's death. By then it could live up to its title, striking a summative note:

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine! (11)⁷⁸

The poem seems fairly typical for O'Hara, especially its self-deprecating humor. The first three stanzas focus on the poet as a reclusive child, but the last one interrupts with brazen self-presentation: "here I am." The gothic vision of a young O'Hara comes to seem ridiculous. Even as they embarrass the earlier stanzas, these final lines still privilege the poet's persona. Yes, "writing these poems" figures importantly in O'Hara's success story, but he identifies himself,

⁷⁸ Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Frank O'Hara come from *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1971), henceforth cited as *CP* in the text.

not his poems, as “the / center of all beauty.” Many of his later poems follow “Autobiographia Literaria” in constructing triumphal yet mildly clownish portraits of the poet. The personage of O’Hara provides a “center” for his most appreciated works.

As O’Hara scholars often note, the poet was indeed the center of a lively and influential circle of artists, writers, and intellectuals in New York City. Larry Rivers famously said at his funeral, “Frank O’Hara was my best friend. There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O’Hara was their best friend” (Berkson, *Homage* 138). From the time of his death to the present day, an image of O’Hara as sociable and popular, surrounded by notable friends, has deeply informed his reputation, and critics often address O’Hara’s poems in terms of his social life.⁷⁹ However, this biographical approach obscures an important counter-impulse in many O’Hara poems, an alternate view of the social that has become too easy to overlook. Contrasting with the boisterous self-presentation that closes “Autobiographia Literaria,” much of his work expresses a powerful sense of alienation from his friends, his lovers, and even himself. Indeed, the very rhetoric of address by which his poems seem to chronicle a lively social world—such as the apostrophic calls to friends by name, or else as “you”—often enables O’Hara to figure anonymity and social detachment.⁸⁰ As Keston Sutherland puts it, a “set of preoccupations with whom O’Hara knew...and how eviable his social life was, has played a

⁷⁹ In her seminal *Frank O’Hara: Poet among Painters* (1977), Marjorie Perloff acknowledges O’Hara’s reputation as a “minor artist, memorable less for his actual achievement than for his colorful life and his influence on others” (2). Perloff was among the first to take seriously his poetic achievement, but as her title suggests, she continues to read him in the context of his sociality. More recently, Lytle Shaw’s *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (2006) and Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2009) likewise discuss O’Hara in terms of his many friendships. Some essays in the collection *Frank O’Hara Now* (ed. Hampson, 2011) continue this trend.

⁸⁰ Here and below, “address” refers to the many ways a poem can reach out to its speaker; it comprises epistolary and apostrophic techniques, as well as simpler, more local strategies such as titling a poem “To Jane.” Among methods of poetic address, this chapter privileges apostrophe because it is most commonly seen as a marker of the lyric genre and because it most powerfully complicates the forms of social yearning that poetic address expresses. O’Hara often mixes and slips between various techniques of address, but I have tried to specify his techniques wherever possible.

good part in distracting attention and interest away from another fact about O'Hara's poems, namely, that they are full of anonymity" (122). Inasmuch as poems like "Autobiographia" seem to affirm O'Hara's beautiful, popular self, they elide his poetry's frequent exploration of how anonymity and distance shape social experience.

O'Hara's counterintuitively anonymizing, distancing rhetoric of address is nascent even in "Autobiographia Literaria." Other than the vague "anyone" in line nine, no pronoun but "I" appears in the poem—befitting an autobiography—but the closing line calls out to an absent "you" through the imperative: "Imagine!" This you is absent in two senses. As the grammatical subject of the imperative to imagine, "you" remains visibly absent from the page, present only as an implied subject; and as the destination of O'Hara's apostrophe, "you" stands apart from the scene of writing, never more than the trace of a misdirected call. The ejaculation "Imagine!" does not ask us literally to imagine something. Rather, it asks us to acknowledge the difficulty of imagining something ("A peaceful war. Imagine!") or the improbability of something ("You're here on time. Imagine that!"). Hence, the closing line does not call us to "imagine" the beautiful O'Hara but to acknowledge the social distance such a lyric call itself seeks to bridge, gesturing as it does from the central beauty of O'Hara "writing these poems" to the absent, undetermined "you" their call invokes. The deictic "here I am" earlier in the stanza combines with the indeterminate destination of its closing command, calling attention to the estranged relation between the specific place and time of a poem's composition and the unpredictable future of a text's material circulation by which it may reach its "you." The felicity of O'Hara's poetic address often lies not in its ability to contact a specific friend or a coterie audience, but in its power to figure the social distances and historical turbulences that the poem itself necessarily remains incapable of tracing.

O'Hara reworks the conventions of poetic address to render various ideas of social ignorance, of not-knowing as central to social experience. Apostrophe traditionally directs a poet's discourse to an absent person or an inanimate object; even in its standard form, it appears as an impossible speech act.⁸¹ Yet apostrophe insistently marks itself as practical speech, emphasizing the rhetorical forms of quotidian communication, the call to another by which we do, in fact, make contact. O'Hara takes this paradox of apostrophe as its primary interest, and through it he explores the fate of the lyric genre with which apostrophe has become affiliated. In his poems, apostrophe and other forms of address render distant and anonymous those whom the poet would seem to know most intimately. This estrangement undermines the poet's own sense of personhood; just as his friends seem to be strangers, O'Hara struggles to know even himself. Often read as chronicles of an intimate social world, O'Hara's poems often view social contact in terms of ignorance, of not-knowing one's friends or oneself. As a vehicle of such social distance, poetic address for O'Hara sustains weak ignorance: the failure to know others, or even oneself, emerges through a rhetoric that seems superficially to establish social contact, and its failure offers insight into the social powers of lyric techniques as O'Hara engages them.

Critics have long seen apostrophe as a key technique of lyricism. Indeed, Ann Keniston argues that apostrophe in the postwar period marks "a longing for a lyric mode that is... hopelessly out of date," a pursuit of the lyric in its afterlives (4). By reworking apostrophe and related techniques, O'Hara explores the lyric's social meanings in an increasingly mediatized

⁸¹ Originating from the Greek *ἀποστροφή* (to turn away), apostrophe comes to English via the Roman rhetorician Quintilian's *Instituto Oratoria*, which defines it as "the figure by which the orator's address is turned from the judge" (IV.1.63). Apostrophe for Quintilian renders an appeal "more lively and spirited"—making it a figure of *pathos*—and for him it addresses "another person" present at the oration (64). In literature of the classical world and early modern Europe, the figure often addresses inanimate objects or persons dead or absent. It appears in many genres of English literature, but its prevalence in Shakespeare's sonnets helped to affiliate it with the lyric. In *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), "Reading Lyric" (1985), and elsewhere, Jonathan Culler casts apostrophe as a sign of the lyric in general, an affiliation whose ramifications for postwar and contemporary American poetry I will begin to unpack.

postwar American culture. He juxtaposes lyric poetry with the quotidian equipment of the mass culture that so fascinates him—with typewriters and telephones, newscasts and cinema. His techniques of address at once bemoan the individual's isolation in the crowd and linger with the impossible desire for a kind of social contact less structured and mediated by such communications equipment. The failure and yet the persistence of this social yearning marks the lyrical pathos of O'Hara's work. His rhetoric of address thus casts the lyric as a lapsed genre, inadequate to both our actual social practices and the forms of contact for which we hope, yet its persistence as a vehicle of impossible social desires sustains the lyrical power of his poetry.

O'Hara counterposes his techniques of poetic address with another kind of call, arguably of equal importance to him: the telephone call. Whereas apostrophe enables O'Hara to explore the technical difficulties that impede social exchange, his writings often present the telephone as a ready-to-hand means of communication. By virtue of their ordinariness, we regard devices like the telephone as mere equipment and not as technology per se, so we often remain ignorant of how they structure and mediate, facilitate and impede, our efforts to communicate. Their technical nature recedes from view. When O'Hara highlights poetic address as a social technique, then, he contrast it with such equipment of social contact that, by virtue of its obviousness, escapes critical attention. The telephone often stands in for an array of social equipment that O'Hara juxtaposes with his techniques of lyric address, and through such address his poems examine how the technologies and techniques of our increasingly mediatized cultures shape social exchange. However, poetic address becomes visible as a social technique only by failing to provide contact in the easy, unobtrusive manner of a telephone; the addressees of O'Hara's apostrophe thus seem anonymous and distant, not fully available to social calls. In other words, poetic address provides insight into the technologies and techniques that shape

social experience, but in so doing it conceives the social field as a field of ignorance—of either not-knowing the other one hopes to contact or, if such contact seems possible, of not-knowing how it is shaped by the technologies and techniques whose invisibility makes it possible.

The question of poetry's relation to technology has only intensified since O'Hara's time. Therefore this chapter concludes by contrasting the significance of the telephone for O'Hara with a more recent poetic experiment involving technologies of the voice, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* (2001), a thick volume that transcribes an audio recording of every word the poet spoke during one week. Whereas O'Hara distinguishes between lyrical techniques such as apostrophe and ordinary equipment such as the telephone, Goldsmith exemplifies a current tendency to align poetic techniques with communications equipment. This alignment supports attempts to write beyond the expressivist coordinates of conventional lyricism. The circulation of social ignorance in Goldsmith's work, however, indicates that his approach is limited by its reliance on ideas of audience and address inherited directly from the lyric tradition. Thus, *Soliloquy* not only exemplifies how prevailing ideas about the poetry-technology relation have shifted since O'Hara's time. It also, through its difference from O'Hara, indicates that attempting to equate lyric address with everyday social equipment in O'Hara's work distorts his view of sociality, eliding his interest in anonymity and other modes of social ignorance in order to emphasize a poetics of the quotidian that fits more neatly with current trends. Of course, O'Hara did take great interest in the trivial, the everyday, and the boring—ideas that captivate conceptual writers such as Goldsmith—but by contrasting O'Hara with these more recent approaches, this chapter excavates an important aspect of O'Hara's work that is all but lost amid ongoing efforts to postmodernize him.

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O'Hara's poems often draw upon the rhetoric of address to explore issues of anonymity and social distance. For instance, he concludes "Morning" with this melancholy appeal: "if there is a / place further from me / I beg you do not go" (*CP* 32). Even as an object of love, "you" may remain superlatively remote, perhaps too far to hear the call of the poem. In response to this detachment, O'Hara largely avoids the false refuge of solipsism exemplified in the early stanzas of "Autobiographia Literaria." The solace of self-attention becomes futile as one grows uncertain not only of others but of oneself. He closes "Mayakovsky" with such self-uncertainty, again through an intricate play of address: "It may be the coldest day of / the year, and what does he think of / that? I mean, what do I? And if I do, / perhaps I am myself again" (*CP* 201). The jokey but confident self-assertion that had closed "Autobiographia" shares little with these lines. Here a crisis of identity reduplicates as it moves through multiple conditions of address. The question in its original form—"what does he think of that?"—could read as inward pondering or as a query to an implied "you." If the corrected form of the question—"what do I?"—more strongly indicates inward pondering, this clarification leaves in its wake a deeper, more troubling confusion between "he" and "I." Even after the transition, the addressee of these questions remains unclear: if "he" is the poem's "I," then who is asking whom about whose opinion of the weather? Perhaps O'Hara hopes his reader or some other "you" will intervene between "he" and "I," telling him what to think. The poem's final sentence takes this self-estrangement two steps further. The conditional, "if I do," throws the matter of the preceding questions into doubt by indicating that O'Hara, whether "he" or "I," might not think of the weather at all. Even if he does have some opinion, "perhaps" tempers the potential recovery of identity with a lingering uncertainty. One can never be sure, it suggests, whether one can be sure of oneself. Just as the play in "Mayakovsky" between "I" and "he" signals the poet's distance from himself and from

any listener his questions might address, so do many of O'Hara's poems modulate his sense of the self and the social through lyric address. The call of his poems figures the social distances across which he encounters his friends, his lovers, and himself as strangers. His poems express the pathos of an estrangement that lingers over the lost possibility of contact that their apostrophic calls mark out.

Many of O'Hara's poetic calls to "you" or to a named addressee neither pursue social contact with their auditors nor bemoan the difficulty of establishing such contact. Instead they linger over the lost possibility of social connection and self-certainty. Consider the short poem "As Planned," written in 1960. Like "Autobiographia Literaria," this poem strikes a retrospective note. In place of O'Hara's frequent self-reference in the earlier poem, however, "As Planned" addresses itself to "you," and it thereby figures both the poet's sense of self and the destination of his address as objects of ignorance:

After the first glass of vodka
 you can accept just about anything
 of life even your own mysteriousness
 you think it is nice that a box
 of matches is purple and brown and is called
 La Petite and comes from Sweden
 for they are words that you know and that
 is all you know words not their feelings
 or what they mean and you write because
 you know them not because you understand them
 because you don't you are stupid and lazy
 and will never be great but you
 do what you know because what else is there? (*CP* 382)

The first three lines leave the referent of "you" undetermined. The praise of vodka as unction for self-estrangement might apply to the poet alone, or the ambiguous "you" might universalize it. Doesn't everybody find that vodka eases the pain of becoming a stranger to oneself? Don't *you*? Soon, though, statements about what "you think" and what "you know" suggest that "you"

applies specifically to the poet. The absence of punctuation further motivates this transition. Line breaks provide a syntactic guide to the opening sentence, running together no clause except the “even” clause of line three. By contrast, the conflated syntax of later lines suggests an ongoing string of thoughts, perhaps an interior monologue. Of course, “you” seems a strange way to say “I,” but in addition to suggesting interior self-address, this technique underscores the poet’s self-estrangement by figuring it as the distance between first and second persons. Once focalized upon the speaker, the monologue berates “you”—that is, the speaker—as insensitive to peoples’ feelings, ignorant of what his words mean, and incompetent: “you are stupid and lazy / and will never be great.” In this derogatory context, the assessment that “you do what you know” seems less a statement on craft and more a claim that “you” know very little. If some trace remains of the opening lines’ hint that “you” could refer to someone other than the poet—indeed, could refer to his readers—then O’Hara now verges on insulting and thus further estranging his audience. Through the rhetoric of address, he plays on a slippage between registers of the first person: when he says “you,” he means to say “I” but seems also to talk about *me*.

As it turns out, the lingering impression that the poem’s “you” directs its judgments outward may indeed be warranted, and in this case the poem opens questions about the temporality of lyric address in relation to the material histories of texts. Donald Allen edited O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* and provides brief notes to each poem. His note to “As Planned” reads, “Dated December 16, 1960, in MS x141. The poem is a reply to a poem by Bill Berkson of the same date. First published in *Paris Review* 49, summer 1970” (CP 549). If the poem seems to hail someone other than the poet, then it may well address Bill Berkson, himself a poet and a close friend of O’Hara. The references to “you” as a writer narrow the scope of address, since not all readers are writers, but Berkson’s vocation accommodates these details. Even as a closed

exchange between the two poets, the inexact reference of “you” allows O’Hara to make a play of insulting his friend while in fact expressing more socially gracious self-doubts. Despite naming Berkson as a possible addressee, Allen’s note yields further uncertainties instead of resolving the poem’s ambiguous address. It refers to the Berkson poem in terms of its date of composition—usually a more particular fact than a poem’s title—yet Allen leaves no ready means of finding the right Berkson poem. One strains to imagine how Allen might have known that “As Planned” responded to a Berkson poem, known that both were composed on December 16, 1960, yet somehow not known even the title of the Berkson poem in question. If he knew the title of the Berkson poem, it remains unclear why he does not provide it.

When asked about these poems via email, Berkson could not recall which poem had prompted “As Planned.” He admits both poems were “written where and when I am not yet sure,” though he suspects “it was at Larry Rivers’ house in Southampton.” He identifies the phrase “as planned” as an “expression I would have known”—comparing it to “FYI,” another shared term—and he believes the phrase arose “apropos some social plan that didn’t work out or anyway changed so that we were left musing over it.” Even as it suggests a social exchange between O’Hara and Berkson, therefore, tracing the historical context in which “As Planned” was written leads to social plans broken and poetic exchanges long forgotten—a narrative of social distance. Indeed, as a reflection on “some social plan that didn’t work out,” the poem’s historical *mise-en-abyme* situates it at once as the trace of an exchange with Berkson and as the failure of social contact itself; without both or either, the poem would not have come to be. The uncertain status of its call to “you” not only opens important questions about the relation between apostrophe and more pragmatic uses of address, but also it illuminates the relation between lyric address and the historicity of literary texts, the material circulation by which

poems reach their readers. In the case of “As Planned” and other contexts of lyric address, the poem’s very identity as a lyric is predicated upon the historical uptake of its address within contexts of readership its address cannot intend—a slippage of the poem’s call to “you” through the historical displacement of the text, its recontextualization as a lyric poem rather than merely an interior monologue or a note to a friend. This interchange between the historicity and generic significance of address rests upon the anticipation of an actual audience of unknown strangers, an anonymous readership as the necessary horizon of the poem’s lyric call. The social forms occasioned by lyric address coalesce around the figure of anonymity that emerges between the multiple senses of audience implied by such address.

In short, O’Hara’s poems often illuminate the relation between the decontextualizing energies of lyric address and, on the other hand, the material histories through which the call itself arrives before us. Here is another poem to “you” written in 1960, titled “Song”:

Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs?
 I was thinking of you
 having a Coke in the heat it was your face
 I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian’s
 I was thinking of you
 and down at the railroad tracks where the station
 has mysteriously disappeared
 I was thinking of you
 as the bus pulled away in the twilight
 I was thinking of you
 and right now (*CP* 367)

One might expect a poem invoking “you” in over half its lines to pursue contact with this second person, but instead it describes a series of departures and missed connections. These underscore apostrophe’s tendency to set up social distances instead of summoning its addressee. From the start, social uncertainty proliferates: either “you” did “see me walking by” and said nothing, since I am unsure, or you missed me entirely. Just as the debut of the refrain, in line two,

syntactically straddles the first and third lines, so does its address signal at once the impulse to establish contact with “you” and the failure of contact that occasions the address itself.

Alongside the first line, “I was thinking of you” heightens the poignancy of a missed connection at the garage. Not only can I walk by you unnoticed, but even if I am thinking of you at the time, we both might fail to note our proximity. The implied full stop in the middle of line three, however, more strongly links line two with what follows: “I was thinking of you / having a Coke in the heat.” O’Hara’s phrasing tumbles similarly over the next line break, as “it was your face” solicits “I saw,” and this enjambment sets the stage for the resonant final line. In the meantime, more images of failed contact occasion more apostrophic calls. I saw “your face” in a magazine, but in fact “it was Fabian’s”—another subtle barb veiled by the slippery address. I write this poem to “you” and not to Fabian, perhaps, because his identity as someone I have seen but not contacted seems comparatively stable, whereas my call to “you” never quite reaches its mark. The second instance of the refrain, unlike the first, is syntactically independent as it recalls us from Fabian’s face to “thinking of you.” We relocate from an auto shop to a rail yard, but the station that would fix our location has “mysteriously disappeared.” Among broken cars and disappeared train stations, what we have lost is not so much “you,” whose absence the poet might lament and seek to recuperate, but the very coordinates of position and vehicles of travel by which “you” could be seen as present and then absent. Every bus has already left, and the apostrophic call seeks not to invoke a lost other but to linger over the vacated possibility of such a recovery. Far from calling up a simply departed figure, O’Hara’s apostrophe explores the continual failure of positive social contact against which such absence and loss would measure itself. Ann Keniston argues that “Postwar apostrophe is concerned...with the paradoxes of otherness, with the often irreconcilable conflict between the desire for others to be made present

and the essential solitude of the lyric speaker” (4). The same could be said of all apostrophe, but Keniston perceives “postmodern address” as “downplaying the optimism...of traditional apostrophe...by foregrounding the absence of the addressee,” precisely the strategy O’Hara prefers (8). Instead of bemoaning disconnection, O’Hara’s address begins to ask how any social connection can be anything but missed, barred, incomplete—and thus to explore a kind of “unrecapturable nostalgia for nostalgia” in the very rhetoric of address that seems to call out for company (*CP* 300).

The poem’s second half derives further momentum from enjambment, a run-up to the halting final line. The second refrain, in line five, reads as an independent clause, so the following line, “and down at the railroad tracks,” seems a fragment until the refrain of line eight completes the sentence. Yet the next line, “as the bus pulled away in the twilight” makes the prior refrain seem “pulled away” from the sentence it had completed. We could read “and down at the railroad tracks / I was thinking of you” as a complete sentence or “I was thinking of you / as the bus pulled away in the twilight” as a sentence, but not both at once. Instead of clumping syntactically, O’Hara’s phrases disperse across their line breaks, less certain of themselves for the forms that separate them. By now the experience with failed contact should suggest that if I was thinking of you as the bus pulled away, that does not necessarily mean either of us was on the bus. The final refrain briefly crystalizes the syntax by resolving the unsteady “as” clauses—“as the bus pulled away in the twilight / I was thinking of you”—but the final line conclusively disrupts the poem’s syntax. The earlier line beginning “and,” likewise an incomplete sentence, anticipates the final line’s dangle, but in the latter case no refrain sweeps in to provide closure. O’Hara instead leaves us hanging. The punctual impulse of “right now” draws out the temporal aspect of what had seemed a series of primarily spatial disconnections.

To what present can this “now” refer? If it indicates the time of writing, then the refrain’s failure to appear a final time, in the present tense—“right now, I am thinking of you”—suggests that the task of writing keeps the poet from “thinking of you.” If he thinks of the poem as he writes it, O’Hara might recall that he “was thinking of you” and recount a series of missed connections, but seemingly he cannot think of you “right now” without leaving off writing. The very act of writing the poem therefore counts among the factors of failed social connection it describes. Given that friends of O’Hara have described him writing poems in the midst of parties, critics understandably view his poetic practice as imbued with the social energies of his life, but the distractible end of “Song” indicates that writing during a party can also be an anti-social gesture, a decision to scribble instead of “thinking of” the people presently nearby. If, on the other hand, “right now” refers to our time of reading, we encounter the same social distances the poem describes. You could not have known the poet “was thinking of you” when he walked by you at the garage, nor can you possibly know that he is thinking of you, the reader, “right now” as you read the poem. Even as it structures the poem, his thinking of you becomes an object of impossible knowledge. No one can refute O’Hara’s claim to be thinking of you at any given time, but it seems impossible to receive the message that he is thinking of you “right now,” at the moment he thinks. O’Hara is no longer living, so he is thinking of nothing at all. He cannot think of you as you read his poem, but this impossibility recalls the deflated goal of personal contact set forth in the first line’s apostrophic question. Even as the poet lived, the absent “you” addressed there can no more appear and answer O’Hara’s simple question than O’Hara himself, in the time of our reading, can think of you. Yet the poem issues both impossible calls together, and they articulate their sense of an unreachable addressee through the figures of social distance the poem sets forth.

Instead of chronicling intimacy with his friends and celebratory thoughts of himself, O'Hara's preoccupation with social contact and his own image leads him to express a poignant sense of isolation and self-estrangement. In this respect he differs from poets who make less agonized uses of poetic address. In "Howl," for instance, O'Hara's contemporary Allen Ginsberg repeatedly calls to Carl Solomon, "I'm with you in Rockland," evincing confidence in his poem's invocational powers (24). O'Hara explores the rhetoric of address with greater skepticism, but he thereby illuminates difficulties with address that might apply to a wide range of poems. He might point out, in other words, that Ginsberg is not with anybody in Rockland. He is buried in Newark, and anyway he met Solomon at a hospital called Columbia Presbyterian, not Rockland. Such considerations may be marginal for interpreting "Howl," but they would be central to O'Hara's understanding of its apostrophe. The rhetoric of lyric address, whether a call to an unnamed "you" or to a named friend, enables O'Hara to explore his idea of distance from his closest friends and from himself. He organizes the idea of lyric poetry's audience through the concept of anonymity, so his poems anticipate an audience of unknown strangers even when they seem to address O'Hara's closest friends or, indeed, himself. This anonymizing and socially distancing function of lyric address operates in tandem with O'Hara's extended preoccupation with the material circumstances of his social life and his writing practices. Both lyric address and the lure of social contact, whose difficulty such address seems to trace, are therefore linked with the specific histories of his friendships and the objects of his daily life. Through them, O'Hara produces a singularly social vision of lyric ignorance.

* * *

Few factors have shaped current ideas about O'Hara's lyric sociality so pervasively as the discourse of O'Hara on the telephone. The poet himself makes the telephone's importance clear:

he often posed with a phone for photographs, and he mentions telephones in many of his poems and other writings. Perceiving that the telephone centrally informs his ideas about poetry's social meanings, many critics have assumed that it positively analogizes a poem for him. Contrary to such claims, the telephone for O'Hara does not provide a simple metonym for the chattiness, triviality, ordinariness, or indeed the social connectivity of a poem. Critics' equations of poems with telephone calls often appear together with claims that we cannot take seriously O'Hara's affiliation between the two. The idea of a "verse telephone call"—which appeared as early as Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977) and remains commonplace—thus emerges as a kind of Pop joke, a ludicrous notion that nonetheless has shaped discussions of how and to what effect O'Hara poems call out to others (Perloff 29). O'Hara's short essay from 1959, "Personism: A Manifesto," contains the most famous and most often misread of his comments on the telephone. Here O'Hara recounts the birth of Personism:

It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. (*CP* 499)

Redell Olsen claims that the poet's "tongue-in-cheek observation that he 'could use the telephone instead of writing the poem' (*CP*, 499) highlights O'Hara's interest in a poetics of ephemerality that might blur the distinctions between art and life" (189). Likewise, Hazel Smith argues that a positive equation between poetry and the telephone "suggests how much he saw a correlation between poetry and live talk" (143). However, instead of analogizing lyric address and figuring an easy transit between "art" and "life," for O'Hara the telephone's ordinariness as equipment for social exchange contrasts with the difficulties of social contact he explores

through poetic address. Telephones link us with others so readily that their technical nature recedes from attention, but O'Hara's techniques of address call attention to themselves as technical—thereby defamiliarizing the techniques and technologies that at once sustain social contact and render such contact necessarily alienated and artificial. Olsen is not alone in calling this narrative “tongue-in-cheek.” Perloff avers that “much of this ‘manifesto’ is, of course tongue-in-cheek” and cites the telephonic reference in particular (*O'Hara* 26). In the same collection where Olsen's essay appears, Rod Mengham and David Herd both refer to “Personism” as a “mock-manifesto” (56, 70). Hazel Smith views the claim “that he could talk on the telephone instead of writing a poem” as a “meaningful joke” (143). These scholars assume that a more earnest poetics would provide a less mundane narrative of its own emergence. By contrast, recent studies by Michael Clune and Oren Izenberg have explained the importance of particularity and mundanity itself in O'Hara's poetry. Both view particularity in O'Hara's poems as a basis for the emergence of sociality; they do much to recover the earnestness of his anecdotes and thereby enable more direct investigation of how such anecdotes inform reading.

In “Personism” and in his poems, O'Hara contrasts telephone calls with lyric address, particularly in poems addressed to friends (a technique discussed in greater detail below). The telephone provides a negative analogy for his poetry's lyric call, and their differences underscore the importance of anonymity and social distance in his poems. Oren Izenberg perceives how “Personism” contrasts poems with telephone calls: “the realization that the poet could simply call his beloved on the telephone does not lead him *in fact* to call his beloved on the telephone” (136). Contrary to common opinion, O'Hara does not write poems to friends *as though* calling them on the telephone; he writes poems to friends *instead of* calling them. This distinction marks the difference between a telephone call's easy social connections and the lyric call's difficulties

with social contact. If we wish to gratify a person, we can simply call him on the telephone and declare our love, but we might choose to write a poem instead. Personism, then, is as much a social theory of telephone calls as of poetry. It may “have lots of adherents,” even though “nobody knows about” it, because unwitting Personists who prefer to gratify their lovers call them on the telephone and declare their love directly: “if they don’t need poetry bully for them” (*CP* 498). Izenberg argues that “we must ourselves reject the account of O’Hara’s poetry as fundamentally ‘personal’ in the sense of being a communicative act directed at a single loved person” (137). Rather, the rhetoric of address that marks a poem as “to” a particular friend ultimately signals the difficulty of making contact with those we ought to know best. Indeed, O’Hara’s poems of lyric address often come between persons in a negative sense. They figure social contact as mediated and interrupted by the very techniques and technologies that, in more everyday contexts, sustain it.

O’Hara sees certain benefits in this poetic disruption of social contact, but he allocates such benefits counterintuitively. What can it mean that “the poem is correspondingly gratified,” rather than a person? Just as O’Hara sometimes writes a poem instead of speaking directly to someone by telephone, apostrophe presumes that its call will not in fact reach the ostensible audience of its discourse. The felicitous apostrophe, in other words, does not gratify any particular addressee but simply satisfies the rhetorical norms of lyric address—and thereby, perhaps, gratifies the poem itself. Through this strange conceit, O’Hara casts poetry as a means to think critically about the technical conditions of sociality. He says of Personism that “one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person...sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person” (*CP* 499). One’s feelings about another person work as a lure, occasioning a performative address that itself

becomes the referent of the poet's feelings and critical attentions. O'Hara's lyric address makes visible the technologies and techniques of sociality, whose influences we normally ignore so that we can focus on the experience of contact with other people. By forestalling such contact, the Personist might replace the question, "How do I feel about Joe?" with the question, "How do I feel about being social?" Although a profound lonesomeness sometimes emerges from this attention to failed social contact, his erotic figures for this poetics indicate that he also finds something deeply "gratifying" in the process.

O'Hara's apostrophic poems distinguish their rhetoric of address from the more facile forms of contact the telephone provides. He begins "Nocturne," for example, with a complaint that "There's nothing worse / than feeling bad and not / being able to tell you" (*CP* 224). Already, the rhetoric of address becomes tangled. O'Hara finds himself unable to tell you how bad he feels, yet these lines themselves tell you that he feels even worse about his inability to tell you—an enunciative impasse paradoxically resolved by its own enunciation. By the poem's closing lines, however, O'Hara has distinguished between apostrophe's complication of social contact and the practical factors that directly prevent him from telling you how bad he feels. If he cannot tell you, this is not because the rhetoric of address stymies his attempts but "Because you have / no telephone, and live so / far away" (*CP* 225). To tell someone how I feel, in other words, requires nothing more than a telephone or an in-person meeting. If lyric address complicates such easy ideas of social contact, it does so on a register distinct from practical communication. The telephone continues to facilitate social contact outside the discursive space of the poem. In "To Jane, Some Air," O'Hara avers that "what we desire is space." In response to the distance he sets between Jane and himself, he redirects the poem's apostrophe to address "space," rather than Jane. The apostrophe traces his social desire's tendency to fold inward upon

itself, and meanwhile the telephone figures an easier but more superficial sense of social contact that remains available despite the distances this poem delineates:

Oh space!
 you never conquer desire, do you?

You turn us up and we talk to each other
 and then we are truly happy as the telephone
 rings and rings and buzzes and buzzes,

so is that the abyss? I talk, you talk,
 he talks, she talks, it talks. (*CP* 192)

Only the telephone bridges the space between us, but for this “we are truly happy.” The solace of telephonic contact seems at once flimsy and genuinely consoling. If the “rings” and “buzzes” of the phone mark “the abyss” between people that it bridges, then perhaps such uncanny technical artifacts are worth the contact they sustain. The conjugation of “talk” seeks to accommodate the telephone’s eerie technicity within daily experience. At first “I talk,” a statement potentially directed at anyone in any context. But when “you talk,” readers tend to drop O’Hara’s earlier address to “space” and instead read the “you” that talks as human, as Jane. The continuation of personal pronouns in “he talks, she talks” sustains this reading of “you” as a person, making the final “it talks” all the more jarring. What talks? If space talked, then the earlier apostrophe would seemingly remain available to personalize space as “you.” More likely, it is the telephone. When it talks, she (Jane) talks, and he (Frank) talks as well. The telephonic exchange sets up a play of pronouns and apostrophic calls within O’Hara’s poetic discourse. Without the poem, it simply makes us “happy” by putting us in touch, even if ignoring the “buzzes” beneath our chat means we ignore the technological bridge that links us.

As O’Hara poems negotiate the difference between telephone calls and lyric address, they also acknowledge a phone call’s practical power to interrupt us—including its power to interrupt

poetry. Hence, in “3 Poems about Kenneth Koch,” the telephone plays a marginal but decisive role as an exterior of poetic discourse. The poems begin with conventional addresses to their subject, already signaling a slide from the title’s “about Kenneth” to a repeated address *to* him. The first line reads, “May I tell you how much I love your poems?” (*CP* 151) The stanza concludes with a conventional apostrophic cry, betokening its intention to address Kenneth and to speak in properly poetic tones: “O Kenneth Koch!” Later sections address Kenneth in progressively more casual ways, asking for instance, “Are you getting the beer, Kenneth?” The closing lines dispense with apostrophe even as they literalize the apo-strophic impulse. O’Hara turns away from the poem itself, preferring a practical form of contact with his friend:

I know and Kenneth will know. Gee, I’m really depressed.
My black back. And now the telephone. “Hello. Kenneth?” (*CP* 152).

Anticipating some unspecified knowledge to come, the penultimate line at last speaks about Kenneth, rather than to him, and with this shift O’Hara becomes “really depressed,” his mood “black.” The poet does not end on a note of lament, however. Instead he turns his back on the poem and faces the consolation of actual contact with Kenneth, in the form of a phone call. O’Hara punctuates the final two words oddly: in the days before caller ID, the telephonic “hello” generally sounded expectant, interrogative rather than declarative. Moreover, if the full-stop after this word implies someone speaking on the other end, then the final “Kenneth?” reads as “Is that you, Kenneth?” and further keeps us from glossing these final words as a straightforwardly celebratory “Hello, Kenneth!” The question mark, in other words, signals lingering uncertainty about the forms of contact that actual telephone calls can sustain—leaving us unsure, as they often did, about whom we might find on the other end—but this gesture for closing the poem still positions actual telephone calls as capable of interrupting poetic discourse with more concrete, reliable forms of social contact. Despite its earlier addresses to Kenneth, the lyric poem as such

cannot move beyond discourse “about” the poet’s friend, whereas a simple phone call cuts off poetic production with the prospect of a more readily available social call.

The telephone’s interruptive effect might itself seem a product of the poem, a way of rendering its own closure through impossible reference to an outside, but we should remember that O’Hara really was a popular man. The telephone really did interrupt him at times, as at the end of an October 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith. After a lengthy discussion of art and life in New York City, their dialogue ends abruptly:

L-S: Your phone!

O’H: I know it. Can you stop this record? (26)

As though Lucie-Smith’s reference to a telephone were not itself enough to render the interview’s closure through reference to its technological outside, O’Hara pauses before answering to ask that Lucie-Smith “stop this record”—presumably the tape recording of the interview whose end the telephone call occasions. For O’Hara such technologies of the voice point toward the social exigencies of the actual world, a world in which our interactions with others are necessarily mediated and structured by all sorts of equipment. But in the direct context of lived experience, the structuring effects of this equipment can be forgotten, making this social contact they sustain seem more direct, less subject to deferrals and uncertainties with which the techniques of lyric address tend to linger. The interview with Lucie-Smith is just an interview, in other words, its reliance upon recording equipment largely pragmatic and forgettable, but its interruption by two technologies of the voice, by the telephone and tape recorder, punctuates their social exchange in a lyrical way.

The telephone sharpens O’Hara’s sense that social exchange is necessarily structured and mediated by technology and our techniques for using it. When such technologies operate as mere equipment for communication, their influence evades our attention, but even a device as ordinary

as a telephone can serve to defamiliarize our techniques of social contact. For instance, in a 1966 short film directed by Richard O. Moore, O'Hara is writing a film-script with Alfred Leslie when the phone rings. O'Hara not only continues to type as he answers, but also he defamiliarizes the series of technologies in which he is caught up, saying to the phone:

This is a very peculiar situation because while I'm talking to you I am typing and also being filmed for educational TV. Can you imagine that? Yeah, Alfred Leslie is holding my hand while it's happening. It's known as performance. (Leslie)

His interlocutor, "Jim" (likely James Schuyler), offers a phrase to include in his writing, to which Leslie says, "Write it in." This would seem to suggest that O'Hara does intermingle writing and telephone calls in the way I have been refuting, except for the sheer strangeness of this scene. One does not normally take up spontaneous creative collaboration over the phone. (What was Schulyer calling about? Surely not to deliver the suggested phrase, "flashing bolt.") O'Hara involves this telephone call within a complex of other technologies and techniques—his performance before a camera, his use of the typewriter—and he thereby highlights the multiple ways that technology shapes social practices, including the practice of writing poems. Unlike its quotidian role in "Personism," the telephone as a tool for poetic composition seems unfamiliar, conspicuously technological.

In this way the telephone helps O'Hara to imagine a materialist poetics, a theory of poetic technique resistant to the metaphysical abstractions that shape conventional approaches to both poetic form and lyric sociality. He responds in "Personism" to the universalist individualism of "negative capability" and related abstractions of romanticism: "Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (*CP* 498). He understands this "true abstraction" as an

acknowledgement of the practical usefulness of communications equipment, combined with a more critical interrogation of the social structures that emerge from technological practices. Discussing O'Hara's experimentalism, Mutlu Blasing argues that he "locates its impulse to technical innovation within the cultural and economic mainstream," instead of pursuing obscurantism in the name of a novel technique (30). Some critics have viewed "Personism" as dismissing serious consideration of poetic technique, but what reads as a dismissal in fact is an insistence upon technique as a matter of practical, rather than purely theoretical, importance. We should consider poetic technique not through abstract formalism but in the same way we consider the techniques and technologies that put us in touch on the telephone:

As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. (*CP* 498)

O'Hara does not purvey "metaphysical" notions of adequation between form and content, only practical ones. The pants of "technical apparatus" should not just fit snugly: they should bulge in the right places. There is "nothing metaphysical" about this analogy for technique, for both telephones and tight pants rely upon physics, rather than metaphysics, to put us in contact with others. As with the erotic image of the "gratified" poem as "Lucky Pierre," this image of technique as a tight pair of pants emphasizes the dual pleasures of technicity and concealment, instead of privileging one over the other. The pants of form, after all, are erotic both for what they show and for what they conceal. While O'Hara values lyric address for enabling critical attention to normally ignored techniques of social contact, he avoids a grand metaphysics of poetic form that might curtail the aesthetic, often erotic enjoyment of poems.

One of O'Hara's most telephonic poems is called "Metaphysical Poem," and it suggests that in daily life the telephone provides such easy social contact that it tends to conceal both the

technical supports for such contact and the extent to which we may remain, despite our best efforts, distant from one another. This poem comes as close as any to unfolding in the form of a telephone call, and in doing so it powerfully excavates the “metaphysical” thinking that supports our attempts to understand sociality while ignoring techniques and technologies:

When do you want to go
 I'm not sure I want to go there
 where do you want to go
 any place
 I think I'd fall apart any place else
 well I'll go if you really want to
 I don't particularly care
 but you'll fall apart any place else
 I can just go home
 I don't really mind going there
 but I don't want to force you to go there
 you won't be forcing me I'd just as soon
 I wouldn't be able to stay long anyway
 maybe we could go somewhere nearer
 I'm not wearing a jacket
 just like you weren't wearing a tie
 well I didn't say we had to go
 I don't care whether you're wearing one
 we don't really have to do anything
 well all right let's not
 okay I'll call you
 yes call me (*CP* 434-35)

Instead of simply mocking the Metaphysical poets' spiritualist impulses, the poem clarifies O'Hara's own idea of the “metaphysical” itself. Whereas many O'Hara poems directly mention the telephone in order to mark its difference from their lyric address, this poem presents a dialogic exchange of the sort a telephone call enables. Despite the conversational tone, the interlocutors immediately encounter difficulty communicating. The first asks “When do you want to go,” and the second answers not with a temporal designation, a “when,” but with a spatial one, a misgiving about going “there.” When the first speaker then shifts to spatial questions, asking where they might go, the second refuses to express further preferences. The

poem begins to seem “metaphysical,” then, because the slide between spatial and temporal registers indicates that the speakers have not met at an agreed time and place, but continue to negotiate times and places, the meta-physics of their potential contact. After some discussions of who should accommodate whom, the spatio-temporal shift reverses itself. In response to the first speaker’s avowal that “I wouldn’t be able to stay long anyway,” the second speaker turns this temporal matter into a spatial one: “maybe we could go somewhere nearer.” After a further digression about the first speaker’s clothing, the interlocutors at last find a topic they can discuss cogently, but this topic is a decision not “to do anything” together after all, not to meet at any time or place. Like O’Hara’s exchange with Bill Berkson in “As Planned,” the event that occasions the discourse of “Metaphysical Poem” itself is the non-occurrence of a social event. The poem’s speakers seem unable to communicate coherently about anything but the decision not to meet, which closes the poem. Instead of settling on a time and place to go out, they agree upon a “meta-physical” meeting—a telephone call which, if it turns out like this one, will again concern the metaphysics of where and when to meet. The planned telephone call may amount to another series of miscommunications, followed by another mutual agreement to defer social contact. Hence, the contact that telephones tend to provide seems metaphysical in multiple senses—not only because it provides an alternative to physical meetings, but also because it enables us to contact each other in order to arrange further contact, or not. Whereas O’Hara’s apostrophic poems contrast themselves with the actual social calls the poet routinely makes, this poem’s transition to dialogue exhibits the “metaphysical” forms of social exchange that a telephone enables—where the telephone’s metaphysics relies upon a series of dialogic techniques and electronic technologies that render social exchange at one remove from itself.

“Metaphysical Poem” shares with O’Hara’s apostrophic verse a tendency to anonymize the persons appearing within it, whether as interlocutors or as objects of a lyric call. This anonymity itself, in fact, signals the central metaphysic of O’Hara’s theory of social contact—a principle that recognizes the mundane and very physical supports of social exchange but that nonetheless traces the abstraction of particular individuals into nameless strangers set at a distance. The first-time reader of “Metaphysical Poem” may experience this abstraction of social ignorance in the delay between beginning to read and eventually recognizing that the poem is a dialogue; especially without punctuation separating them, the two voices at first seem blended together and only become distinct individuals as they approach their decision not to meet. In his virtuosic reading of another apostrophic poem, “For Grace, After a Party,” Keston Sutherland begins to delineate the anonymizing effects of O’Hara’s lyric address, and he does so in a way that clarifies the unthought metaphysics sustaining any theory of social contact that does not critically attend its own technologies and techniques. To unpack the socializing powers of O’Hara’s poetic address, Sutherland ventriloquizes the poet’s second-person rhetoric, and he discusses sociality as the horizon of personal identity, the anonymizing impulse of every named person to become a nameless element of a group:

The eternal circle of your arms and legs is eternally the circumference of my reaching through the infinite air toward the limit of my singleness; I hold you in a circle around me. The social circle whose circumference is my utmost bliss is made of this necessary anonymity, when I am its poet. (128)

By addressing itself to and situating itself among friends, O’Hara’s life and work verges upon a certain namelessness, a subsumption into social spaces in which names signify nothing, or mark only the remains of what once were thought to be distinct persons. In this sense O’Hara does not write personal poems but Personistic ones. Yet Sutherland’s ventriloquy evinces a certain wishful thinking, an anticipation of “utmost bliss” through the sacrifice of selfhood in the

encounter with another. The anticipation of such fulfillment amounts to a metaphysical wish, failing as it does to consider the technologies and techniques, whether telephones or poems, that put us in touch even as they hold us at a distance.

Unlike Sutherland's critical evocations, O'Hara's poetic calls insist upon such anti-metaphysical scrutiny of the social abstractions of self. They prefer not to valorize the abandonment of self in the name of social union but to face directly the anonymizing motions that complicate contact with the friends whose names we know. Sutherland rightly notes that "it is not a named person but an anonymous person who is addressed most tenderly by O'Hara," but this tenderness does not mark an outright celebration of not-knowing the name of the other. Rather, it signals the pathos-laden recognition that becoming social marks the necessary horizon of our inner sense of self, directing us toward a threshold of anonymity across which we may reach other people, but only by not-knowing who they are for themselves nor who we might be for them. Sutherland keenly understands that social anonymity refers us primarily not to names nor to persons, but to a logic of social ignorance that renders the lyric pathos of O'Hara's apostrophic calls: "Not only are these people anonymous, but what matters most about them is their anonymity. Even when we know of course, in one way, that you is Grace Hartigan, yet in another way we do not know in this poem who you are" (122). To think socially, in an O'Hara poem, means thinking about anonymity, where the absence or insufficiency of a name such as "Grace Hartigan" marks a social form of ignorance that textures and sustains the rhetoric of address itself. Indeed, detachments from specific persons mark not only O'Hara's lyric call but his broader skepticism about social encounters. Consider the closing of "Personal Poem," in which O'Hara bids farewell to LeRoi Jones after lunch:

I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi

and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
back to work happy at the thought possibly so (*CP* 336)

Many who discuss this poem, which O'Hara wrote the day he invented Personism, focus on the "two charms" the poet mentions earlier in the poem—an "old Roman coin" and a "bolt-head"—or else on the watchband he buys at the end, in order to emphasize O'Hara's postmodern poetics of consumerism and triviality (335). Others have focused on the middle section's rhetoric of literary taste: "we don't like Lionel Trilling / we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like / Henry James so much we like Herman Melville" (336). However, the obvious question about this poem's closing remains largely unanswered. How can O'Hara doubt that a single person is thinking of him at the very moment that he shakes hands with his friend? As in "Song" above, physical proximity or even tactile contact seemingly fails to guarantee a minimum of social cohesion, for we can never know with certainty that our friends or lovers are thinking of us and not someone else—or perhaps themselves. Indeed, even as O'Hara shakes hands with his friend, he thinks not about Jones but about himself, specifically about whether anyone is thinking about him, O'Hara. In another bizarrely circular exchange between social ignorance and self-interest, O'Hara has reason to doubt that his friend is thinking of him precisely because for his own part, O'Hara is thinking about himself and not about his friend.

Like a telephone call, a handshake would seem a fundamental means of achieving social contact. In the context of "Personal Poem," however, the handshake becomes conspicuous as a social technique, one as likely to mark distraction and the mere semblance of social attention. Through the lonesome crowdedness of O'Hara's lyricism, such quotidian social practices as the telephone call and the handshake become visible as techniques, as supported by specific material technologies and actions whose sheer ordinariness normally obscures their formative influences upon our attempts to be social. O'Hara poems defamiliarize social techniques and

technologies—from the handshake and telephone call to lyric apostrophe itself—and they thereby complicate social practices. They remind us that our techniques of social contact rely upon specific material forms, and these devices of socialization distort the seemingly obvious identities of other people, rendering the idea of another person abstract and anonymous, caught within the material forms of the technologies through which we hope to reach him. As Oren Izenberg puts it, “Not to notice that ‘the poem’ as defined by ‘Personism’ is in fact a rejection of communication (rather than the literary emulation of it) is also to miss the fact that O’Hara’s announced topic in ‘Personism’ is not in fact particularity but abstraction” (136). Through this abstraction of the people one had hoped to reach, social contact itself becomes an object of ignorance. As so many O’Hara poems attest, one can never be sure that the person one reaches on the telephone or the person who grasps one’s hand is present for such exchanges in a meaningful sense; he may, like O’Hara, be so distracted by the very question of his own uncertain status for others that the performance of a social exchange between people, indeed the very image of a person, becomes an abstracted and vacant form.

As it contrasts with the investigations of social exchange his poems accomplish, the poet’s approach to everyday communications equipment brings into focus the many anecdotes that set up the telephone as a positive analogue for the poem in O’Hara’s socially lively workshop. Joe Brainard recounts such a story in Bill Berkson’s *Homage to Frank O’Hara*: “he got up as tho to answer the telephone or to get a drink but instead he went over to the typewriter, leaned over it a bit, and typed four or five minutes standing up” (168). O’Hara’s often-mentioned penchant for writing poems in the company of others has largely encouraged the view that a poem functioned for him as a casual instrument of social contact, much like a telephone call. However, if we imagine a person working at a typewriter in the middle of a cocktail party, we in

fact see a gesture of social isolation, a turning-away from others in order to write—or else, as in the Alfred Leslie film, an effort to demonstrate the strangeness of everyday social technologies and techniques, including the technique of the cocktail party. Taking a telephone call isolates one from one's guests in the same way as writing a poem, but only in the name of social contact across the distance marked by the prefix, "tele-." On the other hand, the lyric call of O'Hara's poems expresses a more confounded understanding of what social contact might mean and how uncertain a matter it can be. The discourse of the telephone provides the primary contrast by which O'Hara makes clear his intention, in reworking lyric address, to trace how the technologies and techniques of social contact render others as anonymous strangers, distant and difficult to reach.

* * *

As often as O'Hara calls to "you" in his poems, he also addresses specific friends and lovers by name. Poems with titles like "A Letter to Bunny," "To John Ashbery," "For Grace, After a Party," and "On a Birthday of Kenneth's" seem to signal his intention to communicate with friends through his poems. Critics often take such poems as chronicles of his social world, itself in turn a primary context for interpreting the poems; the mystique of O'Hara's particular life supports this biographical hermeneutic. (Nobody asks whether Robert Frost knew how to mend a stone wall.) With striking regularity, however, O'Hara's poems to named acquaintances do not simply record a real social relation but instead reflect upon social disconnection. Far from writing poems as occasional notes, he casts even his friends as strangers, unfamiliar figures he finds himself unable to contact. If the poems see even the friends they address as distant strangers, then O'Hara's sense of an audience for his lyric writing may not begin with an intention to write for a close circle of people he knows well. That very notion of social

familiarity is at stake when his poems address friends or lovers. As they record O'Hara's sense of alienation from his particular social world, these poems also provide a concept of lyric address as necessarily directed at strangers, unknown personages, whether named or not.

O'Hara poems that address a friend by name provide the lure of a window onto the poet's social world, not only because they refer to a particular acquaintance of O'Hara's but also because they often seem to record a particular social occasion. Just as Bill Berkson, asked about his poem that inspired "As Planned," recalls whose house the poets were visiting and what social events they had "planned," so does the possible amalgamation of all of O'Hara's occasional addresses to friends tantalizingly offer a detailed image of his social life. Nonetheless, his address to a close friend often describes a barrier between the poet and others, and the apparently occasional impulse of his address similarly helps him to interrogate the very idea that a lyric poem has an occasion.⁸² By scrutinizing the idea of a poetic occasion, O'Hara opens his poems of address to the unknown and indefinite future of their reception, disentangling them from the specific social occasions that might limit the temporal horizon of their address. When his call to a friend or to "you" calls out to us with equal verve, the occasion of their call generalizes itself as an occasion to think through the sense in which such a call can ever be occasioned. Whether his poems address "you" or a specific friend, they often hail a possible future audience that for O'Hara (indeed, for any writer) must remain an object of ignorance. His evocation of this unknown audience even in a simple note to a friend constitutes much of O'Hara's lyrical force.

⁸² His titles for two books, *Lunch Poems* and *Meditations in an Emergency*, help to interrogate the notion of a poetic occasion as well—the first through a bathetic deflation of the notion of occasion, the second by asking what good poetic "meditations" can do in a true emergency. Likewise, the temporal annotations in many of his "I do this, I do that" poems, notations we would now call "timestamps," complicate our ideas about poetic occasions as these relate to the time of writing, helping us to ask how precisely we can think of poetic composition as a moment or an event. Ted Berrigan has confessed an innocent misunderstanding of O'Hara's timestamps: whereas O'Hara usually intended these as cinematic flashbacks, Berrigan assumed that "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday" indicated the time of writing. As a consequence, many of Berrigan's own timestamps mark a moment of writing itself (*CP* 325).

In the 1961 poem “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s,” the special occasion to address Kenneth Koch on his birthday becomes an opportunity to examine what such days occasion in the first place, or do not. The opening line contains one word, a casual call to a friend:

Kenny!
 Kennebunkport! I see you standing there
 assuaging everything with your smile
 at the end of the world you are scratching your head wondering what is that funny
 French word Roussel was so fond of? oh “dénouement”!
 and it is good

I knew perfectly well that afternoon on the grass when you read Vincent and me
 your libretto that you had shot out of the brassière factory straight into the
 blue way ahead of the Russians (what do they know now that Pasternak is
 gone) and were swinging there like a Strad
 And that other day when we heard Robert Frost read your poems for the Library
 of Congress we admired you too though we didn’t like the way he read
 “Mending Sump”
 and when Mrs. Kennedy bought your drawing that was a wonderful day too

but in a sense these days didn’t add up to a year
 and you haven’t had a birthday
 you have simply the joyous line of your life like in a Miró
 it tangles us in your laughter

no wonder I felt so lonely on Saturday when you didn’t give your annual cocktail
 party!
 I didn’t know why (*CP* 396)

In its early lines, the poem reads almost as a toast, coordinating a social space: “I see you standing there / assuaging everything.” The second stanza’s longer lines, wrapped and metered like prose, continue this impromptu tone. The poem seems quite literally addressed to Kenneth Koch on his birthday. O’Hara fondly recalls times in the past year when “we admired you” and praises Koch for having “shot out...way ahead of the Russians” as a writer. These encomia further cast the poem as a gift or a birthday toast. In multiple ways, however, “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s” frustrates efforts to read it as a discourse actually spoken on Koch’s birthday. The poem instead insinuates itself as “on” Koch’s birthday in the sense of “regarding” or “reflecting

upon,” and the resulting complication of the idea of a poetic occasion sets up a distance between the poet and the friend whom he ostensibly addresses. Allen’s note to this poem states that the manuscript is dated February 28, 1961, whereas Kenneth Koch’s birthday is February 27. When the text comes closest to empirical verification of its occasion, it in fact indicates that it was written not “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s” but the day after. Moreover, the poem’s only mention of a specific occasion refers to the previous “Saturday,” when Koch’s annual party did not take place. In 1961, the Saturday prior to the poem’s composition was February 25, two days before Koch’s birthday. Even if the poem had been delivered as a toast at the usual celebration, this would not have been on Kenneth’s birthday as the title proclaims. These dates alone restrain us from reading the poem as “on” Kenneth’s birthday in the occasional sense. Instead, it reflects on the birthday as such; it explores the idea of a poetic occasion and its social affordances.

Recalling “that funny French word,” the poem makes a “dénouement” from one sense of “on” to another, from the semblance of a social event to a “lonely” rumination on the failure of such occasions to materialize as planned. By the penultimate stanza, the event has already failed to take place, for O’Hara pronounces that “these days didn’t add up to a year / and you haven’t had a birthday.” The abeyance of the expected occasion leaves “Kenny” with the “joyous line of your life” that “tangles us in your laughter,” but in the final stanza the happy, socially lively thicket of Koch’s laughter contrasts starkly with O’Hara’s lyrical solitude. The rumination “on” Koch’s birthday leads the poet to self-reflection, and ultimately O’Hara expresses a sense of disconnection from Koch and from himself as well. The non-occurrence of a social event on “Saturday,” when Koch “didn’t have [his] annual cocktail party,” leads the poet not to complain of missing Koch but to resolve an uncertainty about himself. When the party did not take place, O’Hara writes, “no wonder I felt so lonely.” He does not complain of his lonesomeness per se

but that he “didn’t know why” he felt alone. The non-occurrence of Koch’s party improves O’Hara’s self-understanding but also reveals him to be so mysterious to himself that he cannot scrutinize his own feelings without reference to a social plan. O’Hara titles this self-involved narrative of alienation and discovery not “On Feeling Lonely at Home on a Tuesday”—the day his manuscript is dated—but “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s,” where that birthday marks a non-event, the party that did not take place and, even if it had, would not have been on Kenneth’s birthday. The non-event that provides the poem’s occasion thus marks not a communication but a social distance between the poet and the friend he seems to address—and, ultimately, between the poet and himself.

O’Hara’s address to friends does help him to explore the social energies of his poems, but not by affirmatively linking the poet with his coterie. Casting even his friends as strangers, unknown and difficult to contact, he undercuts the assumption that poetic address links him with his most proximate audience. Instead, apostrophe for O’Hara indicates that the destination of lyric address must remain in some sense unknown. Whether his poems reach the ears of a friend at a party or the eyes of a stranger many years hence, the poems suggest that O’Hara cannot know those whom his poems contact. By unsettling assumptions about the intimacy of friendship, his address performs a transition from the supposed immediacy and self-evidence of a coterie to the broader anticipation of an historical audience as the ultimate hearers of O’Hara’s lyric call. Not only does the address to friends help O’Hara to trace a poem’s social reach toward some unknown recipient, but also its complication of immediate social contact provides him an occasion to turn inwards. The call to “Kenny” or to “you” leads him to reflect upon the difficult task of becoming sure of himself, let alone sure of others.

In “A Letter to Bunny,” a poem addressed to V.R. “Bunny” Lang, O’Hara foregoes the sense of occasion so dominant in his birthday poem to Koch and more directly explores the difficulty of expressing himself to a close friend. In the end, this poem “to Bunny” concerns itself as much with O’Hara’s relation to strangers as with his social connection to the addressee he names. It opens with these troubled sections:

1
 Once before I tried to tell you
 about the incinerator. Last summer
 while I was living in the hot
 city. All day long at the theatre
 would flash in my mind this thing
 and that thing too, but usually
 that heavy cave where there were
 no flames bothered me. And I
 could not tell you, Bunny, then:
 there was always my spiral
 staircase with the diamond pattern
 of the well, the eerie sounds of
 a quiet house, le Boeuf sur le Toit
 and friends who would fight and
 would not kill anyone silently.

2
 Now, as if this had bothered me ever
 since, I find the words are at the
 front of my mind. The incinerator
 is clearly horrible, soundless, cold.
 I went there too often with those things
 dear to us both: the tinsels and the
 velvets of the stage, the broken sets
 and used drapes and tattered scrims,
 and they were not consigned to
 any glorious or at least bright
 immolation. Just a clean dump. Do
 you wonder it’s bothered me? you
 don’t, we troupers in private know
 all about carnival gestures. Before,
 I wrote, “it’s grey and monstrous” which
 is false, and fumbled after “hints of
 mysticism” or “death’s shrewdness,”
 all notions, all collections of sentiment

that make a poem another burner full of
 junk. You enable me, by your least
 remark, to unclutter myself, and my
 nerves thank you for not always laughing. (*CP* 22)

In this ambitious poem, O'Hara takes the address of a letter as an occasion to meditate upon mortality, performance, and the aesthetics of artifice. He recalls his habit of dumping into an incinerator "the tinsels and the / velvets of the stage, the broken sets / and used drapes and tattered scrims." He finds the incinerator "horrible," but not for the expected reason that its conflagration reminds him of the fleeting sound and fury of all worldly beauty. Rather, the incinerator is somehow "soundless, cold"—a suggestion of passive forgetting, rather than active destruction. Because the theatrical materials are "not consigned to / any glorious or at least bright / immolation," their demise lacks the spectacular charm they had provided onstage. The "clean dump" of these props brings to mind "'death's shrewdness,'" since we so often die in a less than pathetic diminishment rather than a glorious consumption, but he rules out even this phrase itself as too full of "sentiment" to convey the mundanity of such transitions into nonbeing.

The poem's second figural movement contrasts these props with a clutch of live "blue flowers" that grow near the incinerator. Instead of observing nature to analogize human artifice, as traditional aesthetics dictate, O'Hara gleans a lesson on permanence and appearance from the fate of his stage-props, and he now applies it to the flowers' natural beauty:

3.
 But I still fear to mention the blue
 flowers. They scared me most and I
 prolong other talk. There were fields of
 them around the place, all blue, all
 innocent. The artificial is always innocent.
 They looked hand-made, fast-dyed, paper.
 They nodded ominously in the sun, right
 up to the edge of the concrete ramp, a
 million killing abstractions, a romantic
 absence of meaning, a distorted prettiness

so thorough that my own eyes rolled up
 in fear for their identity and I involuntarily
 cried at the thought of tiny mirrors where
 the object is lost irretrievably in its own
 repetition. Is this how beauty accompanies
 fear so it can escape us? Do you think these
 flowers could be auctioned tintypes or souls
 outside hell? Is blue what they mean by
 “shun posterity” and “the price of fame” and
 “fear of death”? Have I learned it wrong? (*CP* 22-23)

He describes the floral beauty in artificial terms: “They looked hand-made, fast-dyed, paper.”

They seem ready to burn, perhaps, or ready to fail to burn as the tinsel and drapes have done, and they recall the paper violets of a funeral. These flowers have “scared” O’Hara more even than the incinerator. This fearful beauty emerges not because the flowers convey some transcendental principle about life or form or color. Rather, they look “all blue, all innocent” because “the artificial is always innocent.” In place of a transcendental cycle of life and death, O’Hara insinuates a “romantic absence of meaning” by framing the flowers as artificial, like the tinsels, and destined for a similar fate. The daffodils of Wordsworth’s lyrics provide the solace of natural beauty, but O’Hara’s blue flowers strike a darker tone as they advance an aesthetics of artifice and quiet mutability. The stanza draws to a close, and O’Hara asks, “Is blue what they mean by / ‘shun posterity’ and ‘the price of fame’ and ‘fear of death’?” Unlike the earlier formulae, these he does not dismiss. From the attempt to read natural beauty as artifice, rather than vice versa, O’Hara renders a fearful vision of death as at once decisive and lacking the aesthetic solace that remains the province not of the living and mortal but of the artificial and inert. Whereas the memory of daffodils’ natural beauty helps Wordsworth to “make a bliss of solitude,” the menace of O’Hara’s blue flowers is inherently social, bound up with the artifice of theatrical performance and the rhetoric of poetic address through which the poem itself is enunciated. His interest in the relation between death and artifice recalls Auden’s search, in “In Praise of

Limestone” for an “antimythological myth” (57) to account for the transformation of our selves into mere matter after death—especially into the stone of a cliff or a sculpture. Auden, however, concludes with a modestly hopeful myth of naturalism that keeps him in touch with the “Dear” whom his poem addresses:

The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
 Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of
 Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
 Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
 Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape. (73-77)

Both Auden and O’Hara understand aesthetic artifice as a third term that complicates the cycles of life and death. However, instead of imbuing environmental processes with a natural supernaturalism as Auden does, O’Hara lingers more willfully with the questions that artifice raises in face of death and forgetting. These questions lead him to reflect upon how his poem and its rhetoric of address might mark their difference from such processes of mortal diminishment. He aims not to “make a poem another burner full of / junk,” and his efforts produce a nuanced reflection on the performative functions and social effects of lyric address.

In fact “A Letter to Bunny” concerns itself as much with the difficulty of expressing these ideas as with the ideas themselves. The address to a friend transforms into the address to a distant and anonymous stranger, ultimately occasioning an inward turn of self-reflection. However, the poem closes with a reversal that offers a compelling rumination on the performative powers of lyric address itself. The opening stanza both describes and performs an inarticulacy its later lines will overcome. “Once before I tried to tell you / about the incinerator,” O’Hara begins, but “I / could not tell you, Bunny, then.” Beyond this narrative of frustrated communication, the first section offers little more than the vague and abstract “notions” that later sections deride—the jumble of “my spiral / staircase” and “a quiet house,” of a surrealist opera

and “this thing / and that thing too.” O’Hara’s opening lines anticipate John Ashbery’s “Tenth Symphony,” which begins similarly: “I have not told you / About the riffraff at the boat show.” Ashbery concludes his poem about non-communication with a weightless optimism, capable of imagining future social exchange; he describes “a lot of plans and ideas. / Hope to have more time to tell you about / The latter in the foreseeable future.” In O’Hara’s poem, by contrast, his ideas become communicable not in some assured future but in the “Now” that opens section two. “The incinerator / is clearly horrible,” this section tells us. The only comparably lucid statements in the earlier section concern O’Hara’s inability to communicate. “Now,” though, he can “find the words,” and as he does the image of Bunny as this poem’s primary addressee becomes diminished, anonymized. The opening section had carefully specified “you, Bunny,” as its addressee, but here the name “Bunny” does not appear at all, only “you.” The question to “you” in this section further anonymizes the addressee and sets her at a distance: “Do / you wonder it’s bothered me?” A true rhetorical question would go unanswered, but O’Hara neither leaves the question hanging in this way nor introduces dialogic rhetoric by which Bunny might answer (i.e., “I do not”). Instead he answers on her behalf: “you / don’t.” The poet’s unease is little surprise to Bunny because of their shared knowledge, which might seem to bring them together, but the substance of this knowledge, the “private” insight of “trouper,” concerns the mutability of “carnival gestures,” the artificial basis of expression and performance that the poem goes on to describe. As a familiarity with artifice and flameless impermanence, in other words, their shared knowledge does little more than clarify the difficulty of a genuine, naturalized expression that might otherwise unite them. Instead, Bunny becomes a silent and distant “you.” At the close of this section, her diminishment already leads O’Hara to turn inward: “You enable me, by your least / remark, to unclutter myself.” We have seen Bunny anonymized and unable to speak for

herself, so we might read “your least / remark” as no remark at all, the silence that O’Hara recognizes as the only possible response to such calls.

As his address constructs the silence of a distant other, it leaves him fearfully with himself. At the start of the second section he writes, “I fear to mention the blue flowers.” This fear of mentioning stems not from a concern for his addressee but from his own fright. The flowers “scared me most,” whatever we or Bunny may think of them. The solipsistic fear deepens during the third section, culminating in more rhetorical questions, and by leaving these later questions unanswered, he sustains their implicitly declarative effect. Alone with himself, his papery flowers, and the incinerator, O’Hara arrives at a dreadful sense of mortality and self-concern. Though apprehensive, his fears expect no response from Bunny or from “you,” sustain no hope of company.

In a compelling reversal of this antisocial motion of anonymized address, the poem’s closing section renews its calls to “you” and Bunny, and here O’Hara offers a powerful meditation on the socializing energies of performance and poetic artifice. The section begins by rededicating itself to intimate communication with Bunny:

4
 When anyone reads this but you it begins
 to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand
 ears and I don’t know whether I’m weakened.
 Bunny, when I ran to you in the summer
 night and upset us both it was mostly this,
 though you thought I was going away. See?
 I’m away now, but I’m here. And even if the
 rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
 we don’t accept these blue flowers. The sun
 and the rain glue things together that are not
 at all similar, and we are not taken in
 by the nearness, the losses, or the cold.
 Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank. (*CP* 23)

Even as they recenter Bunny as O'Hara's sole intended audience, these lines interpolate us as the readers making the poem "lost." The result, however, is not a communication whose overhearing violates and disrupts its meaning, but the loss of the speaker's own sense of self: "My voice is sucked into a thousand / ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened." The poet's detachment from Bunny now becomes a detachment from himself. The prospect of readers other than Bunny does not necessarily weaken O'Hara, but it highlights his *inability to know* whether he is weakened—the failure of his own self-certainty in relation to the indefinite futures of his texts. O'Hara's self-involved fear of death yields to an accommodating and modestly redemptive solace in the forms of social linkage that theatrical and poetic performance afford. The poem closes with a refusal to "accept these blue flowers" and their suggestion that artifice cannot bridge social distances. O'Hara stages this demurral through a conceit that intermingles the natural and artificial: "The sun / and the rain glue things together that are not / at all similar, and we are not taken in / by the nearness, the losses, or the cold." The glue imputes craftwork to such natural phenomena as weather, placing a limit on this retreat from O'Hara's fearful aesthetics of the artificial. His final call to Bunny, "Be always my heroine and flower," mingles pastoral solace with a lingering sense of its artifice, its inevitable deflation. This self-consciously doomed gesture toward consolation operates analogously with O'Hara's apostrophic calls themselves, "carnival gestures" that, if they avoid making "a poem another burner full of / junk," do still rely upon artifice to achieve their effects.

O'Hara's rhetoric of self-presentation in this section strikes a surprisingly comfortable tone, even as it acknowledges the paradoxes of presence and absence inherent in lyric address. "See? / I'm away now, but I'm here." The question, neither demanding a response nor lingering on the silence it occasions, addresses itself equally to Bunny as the letter's primary recipient and

to any stranger who may read it. O'Hara is "away now" in multiple senses. His writing a letter to Bunny already entails his absence from the scene in which she might read it, as does our reading it instead of Bunny; and in an equivalent counter-motion, the presence of the text itself renders O'Hara "here" equally for her and for us. Of course, Bunny and O'Hara are both "away now" in the sense that they have died, the energetic substance of their lives reduced to inert ashes. Yet through such diectic formulations as "I'm here," O'Hara lingers upon the latent sense of presence that the rhetoric of address invokes—though always accompanied by a silence that signals impossible social distances, including that of death. In this context the final words, "Love, Frank," at once seem formulaic and quite resonant. One can hardly imagine a more expectable way to close an epistolary poem, yet this conclusion sums up the poem's exploration of relations among aesthetic artifice and expressive communication, between deep affection and the evocative powers of mere appearance. The signature remains as a trace of the event of O'Hara's writing to a friend, but it also brackets the broader, less specific rhetoric of address by which the poem had seemed to compass O'Hara's mortality and address us, its present readers. The signature's formulaic quality, in other words, heightens our sense of epistolary address as a performative convention. Like so many performative utterances, this one traffics between the specific message it delivers to a specific addressee and, on the other hand, an address to an audience so broad as to seem anonymous and absent. In this way, the poem constructs its audience not as a group of friends O'Hara knows well but as an indefinite set of anonymous strangers, the "you" that haunts this poem's language of address. We are those strangers reading O'Hara's poems, "here," in a future he and they remain unable to imagine. Instead of retiring into the mortal dread it explores, the final section of "A Letter to Bunny" greets such indefinite

futurity with a “Love” that presents the poet’s address as open to other ears, yet never fully credulous about the redemptive affordances that such futurity might offer.

As we have seen, even when O’Hara’s poems address specific acquaintances with whom we know he shared intense friendships, they do not for that reason provide an avenue for O’Hara to communicate with the people he seems most directly to address, nor even to bemoan their absence at the time of writing. Rather, his evacuated rhetoric of address lingers over the lost possibility of such social contact, exploring the impediments to expressive speech that once seemed to hold out the promise of intimate social exchange. Through this emptying-out of communicative rhetoric, the names his poems address become anonymized: his friends appear not as specific personages but as vague personal figures whose most legible qualities are distance, inaccessibility, inscrutability. Their names themselves often deflate into the indefinite “you” by which O’Hara might address a possible future audience of strangers—beyond his group of friends, the broader group that today sustains his reputation as both a poet and a socialite, a man with many friends. By highlighting the importance of the poetic occasion, the constructed scene of writing from which poetic address might emerge, these anonymizing and socially distancing gestures mark poetic address as central to the question of the lyric’s historicity. The poet’s call to a friend, read decades after poet and friend have died, renders the language of address as centrally concerned with the endurance of a text through changing and impermanent social contexts. Furthermore, O’Hara brings the resulting sense of social distance to bear on his own self-understanding, articulating a sense of personhood (or more properly, of personism) as uncertain of itself as of the others one fails so consistently to have contacted. The social ignorance that O’Hara’s lyric address explores, therefore, likewise helps him to understand self-relation as social and thus alienated, unsure.

* * *

For O'Hara, as we have seen, the unobtrusive usefulness of telephones and other communications equipment sustains ignorance of how technologies and techniques shape social experience. His apostrophe and other forms of poetic address, by contrast, explore how an awareness of social techniques anonymizes others and makes social contact difficult. Through critical attention to such techniques, he exchanges practical for identitarian ignorance, not-knowing how we reach others for not-knowing whom others might be. Critical thinking about the increasingly technicized methods and infrastructures of sociality in O'Hara's era and our own thus impedes the sense of personal contact and intimacy that continues to seem available, for instance, in the archaic imagery of Dickinson's handwritten poems—which bear the promise of a possible, if often lapsed, affective communion with their poet. O'Hara's techniques of address not only anonymize social exchange but also set the poet at a distance from himself, complicating the expressive individualism normally affiliated with lyric poetry. Whereas the pathos of social disconnection lends O'Hara's poems an abiding lyrical force, his tendency to lose his own sense of self in these social distances indicates the limit of the lyric genre's adequacy for him.

Some of O'Hara's most powerful lines describe this loss of self occasioned by social ignorance, through which the self ceases to function as an origin of expressive discourse and instead becomes an object of ignorance. Earlier we glimpsed the pathos of this self-estrangement in the lonesome conclusion of "Mayakovsky," whose confusion between "he" and "I" seems to solicit the indefinite "you" with which this chapter has lingered: "It may be the coldest day of / the year, and what does he think of / that? I mean, what do I? And if I do, / perhaps I am myself again" (*CP* 201). The redoubling loss of self stems from the poet's broader sense of others as

difficult to know, making second-person discourse especially likely to distance the poet from others and from himself. Hence, when “Morning” addresses a beloved “you,” the address does not simply render the beloved present within the poem’s world but confounds any union between lover and beloved. By casting the second person away, apostrophe not only sets up distances between the poem’s “I” and its “you” but also insinuates these as distances between the poet and himself. There may be no “you” to address at all, except as a further formation of the “I” that cannot reach itself. The sadness of this love poem mounts gradually:

I’ve got to tell you
 how I love you always
 I think of it on grey
 mornings with death

in my mouth the tea
 is never hot enough
 then and the cigarette
 dry the maroon robe

chills me I need you
 and look out the window
 at the noiseless snow

At night on the dock
 the buses glow like
 clouds and I am lonely
 thinking of flutes

I miss you always
 when I go to the beach
 the sand is wet with
 tears that seem mine

although I never weep
 and hold you in my
 heart with a very real
 humor you’d be proud of

the parking lot is
 crowded and I stand
 rattling my keys the car

is empty as a bicycle

what are you doing now
where did you eat your
lunch and were there
lots of anchovies it

is difficult to think
of you without me in
the sentence you depress
me when you are alone

Last night the stars
were numerous and today
snow is their calling
card I'll not be cordial

there is nothing that
distracts me music is
only a crossword puzzle
do you know how it is

when you are the only
passenger if there is a
place further from me
I beg you do not go (*CP* 30-32)

The poem alternates between two registers, one addressing the beloved “you” and the other describing the speaker’s environment, often melodramatically. The setting is lonesome, depressive—purple enough at times to make the confessions seem saccharine. We read that “on grey / mornings with death // in my mouth the tea / is never hot enough / then and the cigarette / dry the maroon robe / chills me I need you.” The lonesome “mornings with death” thus motivate the declaration of love the opening lines anticipate, but a syntactic ambiguity also helps us hear the poet “with death // in my mouth.” His speech seems barren or moribund, instead of livening the emotional bond it discusses. The metonymic descent of stars into snowflakes in stanza ten suggests that in stanza four, where “on the dock / the buses glow like / clouds,” the poet may have meant that clouds at night glow like buses, a mercifully less abstruse simile. Through this

combination of sentimental and obscure loco-descriptions, the setting suggests something amiss in this declaration of love. Indeed, the address to the beloved “you” provides cover for a self-involved discourse of the “I.” The opening avowal that “I’ve got to tell you / how I love you always” may seem concerned with the beloved, but it in fact describes what I feel compelled to do. Complaints about trivial matters like cold tea and a crowded parking lot make declarations that “I need you” and “I miss you” seem analogously superficial and self-concerned. O’Hara constructs a pathetic copula between plaintive and loco-descriptive language: “I need you / and look out the window / at the noiseless snow.” Needing you seems less an emotional tug than a thing I might do and then be done with doing, just before I look out the window or park the car. Perhaps my “Morning” blues will be gone by lunchtime. Wherever the poem addresses “you” without reference to the speaker—“what are you doing now / where did you eat your / lunch,” and later, “do you know how it is // when you are the only passenger”—they further isolate the poet by sounding the silence as these questions go unanswered. Despite its rhetoric of address, and indeed through it, “Morning” emerges as a poem of self-concern in which even the declaration of love counts as something on my to-do list.

The poem tells less about the poet’s love than his lonesome self-involvement. Yet O’Hara recognizes the solipsistic impulse of his address: “it / is difficult to think / of you without me in / the sentence.” This sentence, for a change, does not make the speaker its subject except secondarily, as the one having difficulties. Instead it describes the central problem of this poem’s apostrophes—and of O’Hara’s ignorant sociality more broadly—its frequent reduction to the orbit of an isolated “I” whose sense of self cannot coordinate social relations with others. Aside from the meaningfully unanswered questions mentioned above, only two instances of address in “Morning” are not framed by reference to the poem’s “I.” O’Hara writes, “you depress / me

when you are alone.” On its face, this makes little sense. Why should knowing that someone else is alone make one depressed, especially one so self-involved as the speaker? Perhaps “you” enjoy solitude. The idea makes more sense in the first person: “I depress myself when I am alone.” This change fits tidily with the rest of the poem, and it indicates a further consequence of the poet’s self-concerned discourse of love and loneliness. Apostrophe’s inadequacy to the desire for social contact makes “you” another name for my own lonesomeness, and this second-person solipsism suggests that even in his isolation, the poet stands at an unhappy distance from himself. Where O’Hara describes the beloved’s loneliness or his own, he ultimately insinuates that he is lonely for himself. The other direct address to “you” provides a poignant closing: “if there is a / place further from me / I beg you do not go.” O’Hara does not lament a departure, nor a social distance his address fails to bridge, but an isolation that apostrophe itself sets forth. Even as these lines disconnect “you” from the speaker, they indicate that a further distancing would make the speaker not only more lonesome for others but also less sure of himself.

Some poems less concerned with address illuminate the logic that links O’Hara’s social ignorance with an uncertain sense of self and a diminished capacity for expression. Hence, “A Step Away from Them” anonymizes other people, equating them with objects and abstracting them into types, and these anonymizing gestures lead O’Hara to see himself as ignorant and lacking personal depth. In the poem “laborers feed” not themselves but “their dirty / glistening torsos,” and instead of women O’Hara depicts “the / avenue where skirts are flipping / above heels” (*CP* 257). When “A / Negro stands in a doorway with a / toothpick, languorously agitating,” the vision of a “Negro...agitating” may suggest political turmoil, but the scene is also calm, ordinary. Other people lose their depth and become equated with the objects around them. In their specificity, these objects maintain an imagistic vividness, but most are plural and mass-

produced, incapable of registering as personal. Their owners become anonymous, lumped into groups such as “laborers” or “Negro” or “Puerto / Ricans” or the title’s nondescript “Them” (257-58). If the terms for racial others raise political questions for the contemporary reader, the difficulty of discerning an identity-political judgment in this scene may be related to O’Hara’s broader difficulty with seeing others as actual people and not nodes in an alienating landscape of social technologies. Only the dead enjoy the specificity of proper names and the fullness of character these imply: “First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock.”⁸³ Only *as lost* do such specific personalities seem available to thought at all. O’Hara wonders, “is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” Before they died, “life was full” of these people for the poet. Now they are buried, and if the earth that covers them cannot express fulfillment, then perhaps the Earth and its groups of strangers can be “as full” of analogously particular others with their attributes and social bonds. For his part, however, the poet renders such bonds as lost and unavailable; in light of such loss, the living world seems populated by interchangeable and anonymous others, lacking the individual qualities by which we come to know one another.

These social detachments set up a distance within O’Hara’s sense of self. The poem had begun, “It’s my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk,” but later “one has eaten and one walks.”⁸⁴ The abstraction of others into groups without qualities continues when O’Hara mentions a storage warehouse “which they’ll soon tear down.” Who is this “they” among whom “one” lives, the poem seems to ask, and what does it mean that one often refers to this vague “they” in everyday

⁸³ The manuscript of “A Step Away from Them” is dated August 16, 1956, five days after Pollock’s death. Latouche had died the previous week, on August 7, and V.R. “Bunny” Lang died earlier that summer, on July 29. I am not alone in reading “them” in the poem’s title as the flâneur’s shorthand for “other people,” but given this string of losses leading up to the poem, “them” could also refer to these specific people—in which case the idea of being “a step away” from mortality eerily foreshadows O’Hara’s own accidental death.

⁸⁴ Geoff Ward and others have linked the impersonal pronoun “one” with the frequent appearance of its French equivalent, “*on*,” in the poetry of Pierre Reverdy, mentioned at the end of the poem (61). Whereas Ward takes this impersonal nomenclature as a universalizing impulse, I follow Sutherland in viewing it as a further formation of O’Hara’s interest in anonymous sociality, and I specifically see it as a sign of the poet’s self-estrangement.

language? The poet casts himself, meanwhile, not as an individual with expressive capabilities but as error-prone and self-estranged. Of the warehouse he writes, “I / used to think they had the Armory / show there.” If this is a different “they” than those who will soon tear down the warehouse, then the “them” of the title marks an impulse to understand such anonymous collectivities in relation to an equally despecified, ignorant sense of oneself.

The poem ends enigmatically: “My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.” Keston Sutherland has pointed out that today, as at the time of this poem’s writing, no book by Reverdy has appeared under the title *Poems*, nor *Poems by Pierre Reverdy*: “The author’s heart, which is not possibly in his pocket, is also not possibly a commodity called ‘Poems by Pierre Reverdy.’ His heart then is the phantasm—imagine!—of that book, yet to be translated and put in print” (126). If O’Hara aligns himself with the anonymous others by equating his heart with a mere object, what can it mean that said object does not exist? Unlike the other names in this poem, Pierre Reverdy remained alive when O’Hara wrote it, yet O’Hara identifies not with this living poet but with his nonexistent book. Given the tendency to over-particularize and depersonalize other people by affiliating them with objects, O’Hara cannot equate himself with an object more concrete than the abstract “one” who makes mistakes about where “they” hold art shows and which books “they” have published. He feels no more capable of contacting the living man, Pierre Reverdy, than he is of knowing himself. Only across the distance of mortality do other people appear to have been so vividly alive in their personal particularities as to have been available for genuine personal contact. When Sutherland asks his reader to “imagine!” the poet’s heart as a nonexistent book, he joins the O’Hara who concludes “Autobiographia Literaria” with the same exclamation; both take the measure of this mortal distance with a call to “you” whose time and place of reading the writer cannot know. Imagine!

O'Hara's attention to the anonymizing influence of social groups informed not only his poems but also his social life, displacing his sense of self despite his popularity. Comparing the New York art scene with those of Europe, he tells Edward Lucie-Smith that

if you have an American artists and you are to, oh, give a party for him. Then you would have a very wide range of people who are not, who may or may not know each other. In fact the person that you give the party for would be the only cohesive element which will link them all together (18)

The idea of one person who knows everyone at a party might seem to center and stabilize the figure of the individual in relation to social groups, but tellingly the central figure here is someone other than O'Hara. To say that one person will provide a group's "only cohesive element" is quite different from saying that I, Frank O'Hara, am the one who knows all the people at this party I organized. In the early poem that O'Hara calls his "Autobiographia," he elects himself "the center of all beauty," but in this interview the year before his death, the poet displays a fully developed appreciation of how anonymity, that social mode of ignorance, shapes the experience of social life and the sense of self. The poet positions himself among a group of anonymous others, each of whom has only partial knowledge of those in the group, and as so many of his poems of anonymous sociality and self-estrangement attest, the task of lyric poetry for O'Hara is not to recenter the individual's expressive self but to explore the difficulties that ignorant sociality sets forth. He deploys poetic address to record the impediments to social contact that contribute to this sense of an anonymous social field, and as a figure for inevitably incomplete social contact, apostrophe sustains the lyric pathos of his most affecting work. By contrasting the apostrophic call of his poems with the telephonic calls that structure our quotidian social contact in largely unthought ways, O'Hara reasserts the power of lyric conventions to provide insight into the conditions of modern sociality, conditions whose often uncritical reliance upon communications equipment has only intensified since his time. In the process, however, his

rhetoric of address also inverts the traditional logic of lyric selfhood as an expressive source. By rendering a poetic persona as ignorant of himself as he is of the others whom he cannot reach, O'Hara indicates a sense in which the lyric genre's emphasis upon personal expressivity is irrecoverably lapsed. The lyric power of his writing remains impressive as he lingers with the dual loss of expressive selfhood and social intimacy, and he strikes this balance by negotiating the conventions of a genre that already seemed outmoded yet, like the impossible promise of social contact itself, too attractive to abandon altogether.

* * *

In 2001, conceptualist writer Kenneth Goldsmith published *Soliloquy*, a book that deals with the relations among poetry, sociality, and technologies of the voice in a manner strikingly different from O'Hara. Originally presented in 1997 as a one-room installation at Bravin Post Lee gallery in New York City,⁸⁵ *Soliloquy* is now available as a thick, paperbound book and on the Web, as part of the Electronic Poetry Center, where Goldsmith explains how he produced it:

Soliloquy is an unedited document of every word I spoke during the week of April 15-21, 1996 from the moment I woke up Monday morning to the moment I went to sleep on Sunday night. To accomplish this, I wore a hidden voice activated tape recorder.

Whereas O'Hara draws a contrast between the technicity of lyric address and such ignorable equipment as the telephone, Goldsmith involves vocal equipment directly in his compositional process. He uses the voice recorder as a means, without defamiliarizing its function; indeed, its unconcealment would disrupt his method. In this way, *Soliloquy* exemplifies an increasingly common interest in how texts that are written and read with electronics differently render the

⁸⁵ On the gallery version, see Gordon Tapper's review in *Zing* magazine. Like Goldsmith himself, *Soliloquy* has since the late-1990s migrated from the world of visual art to that of experimental literature. As Tapper already perceived, the project "comes across more forcefully in book format." The work enjoys far more notoriety as a literary object, and I address it as such. Nevertheless, its tendency to slip between media and genres—from gallery installation to printed book to web site—should provide ample reason to question Goldsmith's claim that he makes no editorial intervention upon the text.

trivial, quotidian aspects of language. This interest in commingling technology and the everyday—instead of emphasizing the critical powers of technicity—has also shaped approaches to O'Hara, and because it breaks with O'Hara's own ideas about the relation between poetic techniques and communications equipment, the poetics Goldsmith exemplifies has tended to distort critics' ideas about how technologies shape sociality in O'Hara's work. In short, Goldsmith's coordination of technology, sociality, and lyricism provides a thumbnail sketch of the commitments that have led some O'Hara critics to minimize the importance of anonymity and social distance in his work, emphasizing instead his interest in everyday language, consumer culture, and casual social encounters. As a particularly vivid and influential exemplar of this perspective on poetry, technology, and sociality, *Soliloquy* clarifies the reasons for excavating this counter-impulse of O'Hara's poetry.

Despite calling *Soliloquy* "an unedited document," Goldsmith does make several changes and additions to the text, but the most significant alteration is something taken away: the voices of other people. As he transcribes the recordings, Goldsmith ignores the recorded words of those with whom he spoke, excluding these from the text of *Soliloquy* so that only words spoken by him appear. This often makes it impossible to know or even guess what an interlocutor of Goldsmith's has said. Together with his other editorial alterations, this removal of others' voices helps the poet to pursue a critique of the lyric genre and the ideas of sociality associated with it. Goldsmith divides his book into seven sections, one for each day, and numbers these as "Act 1," "Act 2," and so forth. This alteration might seem to place *Soliloquy* primarily in conversation with drama, but in fact it contributes to his critique of the lyric. Both soliloquy and its rhetorical sister, apostrophe, stem from classical rhetorics of theater and oratory. Their affiliation with the lyric is relatively recent, and by insinuating the longer-standing link between soliloquy and

drama, Goldsmith suggests that those who affiliate the lyric with soliloquy understand the genre through a concept not proper to it. To see his erasure of others' voices as part of this attack on the lyric requires closer attention.

As a rhetorical device, soliloquy has evoked lyrical ideas of individual self-expression since at least the romantic era. Whereas Sidney had associated the lyric with apostrophe, John Stuart Mill cements its affiliation with soliloquy in his 1833 essays, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in which he distinguishes between true poetry and mere eloquence: "we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*... The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude... All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy."⁸⁶ Just as O'Hara's anonymous "you" heightens awareness of the unknown future audience that may await any poem, so does Mill's language of overhearing describe the lyric as reliant on a kind of ignorance. The poet, for Mill, must write as if he does not know he has an audience, and the poet's ignorance does not end with the question of address. "Great poets," he writes, "are often proverbially ignorant of life." Whereas this dictum concretizes the British romantics' association of lyricism with childlike naïveté, O'Hara explores the fate of such precepts when the lyric poet is so urbane and so undeniably popular that he cannot credibly claim ignorance of his audience or the world around him. The isolation and self-estrangement occasioned by O'Hara's poetic address insists that even in a crowded room the poet can express a lyrical solitude.

Through the willful removal of other voices from *Soliloquy*, by contrast, Goldsmith shows that a solitary discourse can seem crowded with absent others, and he thereby parodies the

⁸⁶ Though Sidney does not explicitly link apostrophe with the lyric, his "Defense of Poesy" (1579) offers several examples of apostrophe in connection with his discussions of lyric power. Like other sonnet sequences, Sidney's often turn to apostrophe at exclamatory moments. Thomas Moore appears to have brought "apostrophe" into English mere decades before Sidney's writing. Mill and other commentators on soliloquy, meanwhile, draw the term from Quintilian and St. Augustine.

high seriousness of lyric conventions. The book's sheer size distinguishes it from earnest soliloquy. Indeed, *Soliloquy* is a very long, boring book—boring enough, Goldsmith hopes, that no one will actually read it. In a lecture titled “Being Boring,” he says as much: “You really don’t need to read my books to get they idea of what they’re like; you just need to know the general concept.” Goldsmith transforms Mill’s injunction to write as if he has no audience into a playful attempt not to have an audience in fact, not to have anyone actually read his book.

Likewise, instead of presenting “feeling confessing itself to itself,” Goldsmith offers one side of his mundane conversations, a deflation of customary lyric intensities. As Christian Bök puts it, “the writer lampoons the romanticism of lyric poets, who give voice to their most spontaneous meditations, pretending to cogitate alone and aloud as if to themselves, knowing full well that...a politburo of ignored readers eavesdrops upon every uttered thought.” Marjorie Perloff further specifies the romanticist target of the poet’s critique; she cites Wordsworth’s ambition to render a poetry of everyday life “in a selection of language really used by men” (qtd. in Perloff, “Moving” 93). Goldsmith’s adherents view *Soliloquy* as an effort to remain truer to the ordinariness of everyday language by providing an unaltered transcript of what one person says in daily life. As Bök writes, “despite the desire of lyric poets to glorify the everyday language of their casual, social milieu, such a democratic utopianism often balks at the candour, if not the squalor, of ordinary language.” He argues that Goldsmith’s work provides a democratizing, feet-in-the-mud portrait of language as we live it: “the author talks among these people, gossiping...behaving in fact like a soliloquist, who pretends that his intimate thoughts go unobserved.” By this view, Goldsmith reveals the contradictory commitments of the lyric genre, by which “lyric poets have tuned out this other voice” of everyday interlocution “so that only one voice gets heard,” despite the lyric poet’s stated aim to render language as it is really spoken.

Discussing *Soliloquy*, Bök sees Goldsmith's recuperation of ordinary language as "an astounding commitment to an ethics of speech, owning up to all that he says, taking credit for each word," but this account of ethical responsibility seems dubious. An ethical care for the social relations of speech would not counsel the erasure of words spoken by one's interlocutors, especially when those words shape one's own discourse. Unlike *Soliloquy* and unlike normal soliloquy, an earnest attempt to record the textures of everyday language would include both sides of a conversation instead of focalizing on a single voice—precisely the gesture of privilege that Bök and Goldsmith deride in "conventional" lyric poems. Goldsmith's erasure of other voices draws *Soliloquy* nearer to the condition of lyric poetry and farther from the task of recording everyday language. Elsewhere Goldsmith has expressed the hope that "when I died, I would leave something behind which had nothing to do with me, my ego, my 'vision,'" but much like the conventional lyric, *Soliloquy* leaves us with the singular discourse of the author himself, excluding the traces of social exchange that sustain the very words of the book ("Theory"). The resulting one-sided conversations read nothing like everyday language, unless you consider the annoying experience of hearing one side of a telephone call to be paradigmatic of everyday language.⁸⁷ One often can follow the conversation with only Goldsmith's half visible, but without the interlocutors' contributions one sometimes loses the thread: "Uh huh. Sure. You wanna put it. No we can put it there. OK, we can put it there sure. Uh huh. Next line after which we. Right. OK. Uh huh" (109). Context reveals that Goldsmith says this while working with "Connie" on the layout of a poem for publication, but without her half of the conversation we cannot know whether the first "there" in his string of responses is a different place than the "there sure" to which he later assents. The exclusion of other voices makes the

⁸⁷ Bök: *Soliloquy* is "a text that reads very much like the overheard half of a telephone call."

language unrealistically hard to follow, while also rendering Goldsmith's isolated voice as fragmentary, shaped on all sides by unheard others.

The poet may not have intended this fragmentation, for he associates such effects with the literary conventions he derides. His introduction to a 2009 reading by flarf poets and conceptual writers included these maxims: "Start making sense. Disjunction is dead. The fragment, which ruled poetry for the past 100 years, has left the building. Subjectivity, emotion, the body, and desire, as expressed in whole units of plain English with normative syntax, has returned" ("Introduction"). Quite to the contrary, the single voice of *Soliloquy* stunningly shows how fragmented our daily lives in language tend to be—especially in technological contexts such as the telephone or chat room—and how disjunctive our discourse would sound in the absence of other peoples' words. Even when the poet's interlocutors seem to say nothing at all, their presence continually structures and guides his words:

OK, give me a fucking cool press release. Go go go. Just say something about her paintings. Just give me, uh, just say something... I haven't seen the show. Uh huh. I don't know, I haven't seen the show. Intriguing. (*Soliloquy* 23).

Here is a strange soliloquy indeed. The term refers to a solitary speaker who pretends to be unobserved. Much of Goldsmith's discourse in *Soliloquy* is shaped around the acknowledged presence of an interlocutor, and here he busies himself with soliciting language from this other. Although the fractured rhythms of *Soliloquy* do not earnestly reproduce the aesthetic of shattered subjectivities he attacks in the long tradition of lyric expression, the principles of lyric writing do remain surprisingly active within his project. Goldsmith's aim to critique the lyric loses sight of what still draws us to lyric writing—and what still lingers in *Soliloquy* itself—even as the lyric comes to seem lapsed or belated as a genre: the impulse toward social contact and, even when this seems unavailable, toward a possible social future. In his deformation of everyday speech,

Goldsmith does not fully register the pathos of an inchoate loss that his erasures perform, yet his own discourse in the book continues to mark the place of the others' language that had shaped and sustained his own. Despite the erasure of other voices, Goldsmith's words ceaselessly call for and respond to the words of others, and as a record of social impulses, they share something with O'Hara's apostrophic call, as the latter marks a social longing never quite fulfilled.

Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* and O'Hara's apostrophe thus complementarily rework their respective rhetorical forms to explore the lyric's afterlives, albeit in opposite ways. For O'Hara the apostrophic call that ostensibly hails a friend or lover instead occasions a meditation on the impediments to social contact and the poet's resulting sense of isolation. For Goldsmith, the rhetoric of soliloquy that ostensibly provides a vehicle for solitary reflection instead becomes crowded with the voices of unheard interlocutors. Both writers invert a rhetorical mode commonly associated with the lyric, and these inversions enable them to reconsider the status of the lyric at the time of their writing. If *Soliloquy* more decisively departs from the meaning of its namesake than does O'Hara's apostrophe, this may be so because Goldsmith pursues a more directed critique of the lyric genre itself. The isolated echoes of O'Hara's lyric address render a pathos about the lyric genre—its rhetoric of social contact lapsed, incapable of putting us in touch, yet still resonant through its failure. But Goldsmith's effacement of other voices situates the author as a conceptual machine, a "word processor" with "contacts" rather than friends—where this word suggests both social and electronic linkages—and casts the literary work as good for little more than sustaining a critique on the conventions of literariness. Goldsmith's soliloquy fails more completely to live up to its name than does O'Hara's apostrophe, in other words, because for Goldsmith the coordinates of lyric expression are more decisively outmoded, whereas for O'Hara the genre remains vital despite its belated sense of romantic individualism.

The most instructive differences between O'Hara and Goldsmith unfold in their ideas about the relation between poetic production and technologies of the voice. For O'Hara, as we have seen, the telephone stands in for a complex of communications equipment whose very ordinariness makes it elusive of critical attention; O'Hara's rhetoric of address, by contrast, voices a poetic call that compulsively scrutinizes its own techniques of expression and socialization *as techniques*, the very form of critical attention that ordinary equipment such as the telephone eludes. Through the distinction between apostrophe as poetic technique and telephony as communications equipment, O'Hara identifies apostrophe's failure to cement social contact as a site of inquiry into the normally invisible technologies and techniques, the forms of social construction, that necessarily sustain social contact. Even as it yields a pathos of disconnection and loss, this technique offers critical insight into the conditions of socialization under which we live. Linger with the modes of social ignorance that structure its rhetoric—a sense of calling to anonymous others, or to a necessarily unknown future audience—O'Hara's lyric apostrophe explores what it can mean to pursue a closeness of social contact one considers unavailable and, ultimately, demonstrates the power of lyric rhetoric to render such pursuits in language. For Goldsmith, on the other hand, the lyric genre that is the target of his critique unfolds not in contrast with but through the equipment he involves in his poetic process. His voice recorder provides a positive support for his creative production. Through the erasure of others' voices, he seeks to manage and contain the noises his machine records, but his stated aim of providing an "unedited" record of one person's everyday speech could hardly begin without the recording equipment he involves in his process. This shift in attitudes about technology's relation to poetry marks a broader shift in attitudes about the lyric poem and its social energies. O'Hara continues to acknowledge the power of lyric pathos by contrasting it with the ordinary

equipment of social exchange, but Goldsmith attempts a more forthright critique of the lyric, opening a bathetic exchange between rarified lyric techniques and our everyday lives in language. Together these contrasting approaches indicate the extent to which the lyric's status as lapsed or belated has shaped American poets' reflections upon poetry's social powers since the middle of last century.

Even a generous reading of Goldsmith should not attribute literary value to his work, since books like *Soliloquy* seek to undermine the notion of literary value itself. This troubled relation to the discourse of value indicates that Goldsmith differs from O'Hara in his approach to the trivial and the everyday. The print edition of *Soliloquy* includes an epigraph attributed to Catullus: "Someone I flattered in a book pretends / he owes me nothing. Oh the trash I have for friends!" Goldsmith's work suggests a perverse gloss on these lines. Instead of calling his friends trash, as Catullus seems to do, he refers to the trash that he offers friends—the trash of his own language or, as Goldsmith puts it in the book while describing the project to a friend, "the shit that I spew myself" (15). Goldsmith's interest in everyday language's triviality, its trashiness, insinuates a substantial critique of literary value per se—leaving us, as Goldsmith readily admits, with little reason actually to read his work. In an essay on "Uncreativity as Creative Practice," Goldsmith avers that he is "interested in valueless practice," but the narrowness of his concept of value obscures the fact that his own *interest* in such a practice vitiates its valuelessness.⁸⁸ For him the arena of "innovative poetry...as a gift economy...is one of the last places in late hyper-capitalism that allows non-function as an attribute." He therefore downplays the creative efforts

⁸⁸ Goldsmith writes at length on uncreativity in *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (2011). In conversation with Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), he argues that in the digital age we must abandon the notion of "genius" as productive of new texts and ideas: "an updated notion of genius would have to center around one's mastery of information and its dissemination" (*Uncreative* 1). When the digital age reconceives the genius as an information manager, then we become retrospectively capable of discerning the "romantic isolated figure" of lyric genius, now lapsed and untenable, as a subject not of information but of ignorance, discernible from his predecessor by virtue of his non-knowledge, his lack of and aversion to information.

involved in producing his books: “I used to be an artist; then I became a poet; then a writer. Now when asked, I simply refer to myself as a word processor.” Goldsmith indeed dehumanizes with this posthumanist flourish, repeated here and there, of calling himself a word processor, for he thereby asks us to overlook both the status of word processors as commodities and the gendered history of the wage laborer known as the typist, a kind of human word processor for the days before computers. Despite his apparent interest in deemphasizing labor as a basis for value, his narrative of transcribing *Soliloquy* (available on the Web version) seems to take labor as a powerful sign of value: “I transcribed *Soliloquy* during the summer of 1996 at the Chateau Bionnay in Lacenas, France during a residency there. It took 8 weeks, working 8 hours a day.” Emphasizing his eight-hour workdays, Goldsmith analogizes his production of *Soliloquy* with wage labor and solicits its valuation on the basis of how much work it took to make.

Goldsmith finds it difficult, then, to negotiate the relation between productive labor and value. This difficulty troubles his attempt to critique literary value through his works, and it arises because he does not consider his book’s relation to discourses of value that cut across the labor-value correlate of capitalism. No one would claim that *Soliloquy* is fully immune to the value systems of “late hyper-capitalism,” but the book is no more exclusively “in capitalism” than the works of Emily Dickinson are exclusively “in the nineteenth century.” Rather, Goldsmith’s book remains open to multiple discourses of literary value—those of the histories of genres, for example, or of literary experimentation itself—without for that reason escaping the global capitalist enclosure. Hence, when he says that “writing should be as effortless as washing the dishes, and as interesting,” we should focus on the latter part of his maxim (“Theory”). Goldsmith wants writing to be as dull as dishwater, and indeed his work is very boring. If it fully accomplishes this deflation of literary value, however, it should neither garner nor merit attention

at all, since to consider an object worthy of interest is an attribution of value. Yet his books solicit careful thought about the literary traditions in which they participate. Goldsmith never manages to abandon the old ideas of literary value he intends to critique, nor even to exceed the coordinates of lyric writing he aims to breach. As his writing fails to fail, in other words, it succeeds in drawing attention to a variety of factors that have shaped the afterlives of lyric poetry since O'Hara's time.

Goldsmith and O'Hara share an interest in ignorance's role in poetic composition, especially its social effects, but they differ in important ways. Goldsmith deploys a concept of weak ignorance when he claims that through procedural writing, "understanding can be achieved, perhaps, on a different level—one of a 'willful ignorance'" ("Theory"). In *Soliloquy* and other works, he pursues this willful ignorance by procedurally manipulating vast quantities of language. The postscript to *Soliloquy* claims, "If every word spoken in New York City daily were somehow to materialize as a snowflake, each day there would be a blizzard."⁸⁹ Similarly, another book, *Day* (2001), presents in one large volume the full text of a single edition of the *New York Times*, much of which he keyed by hand.⁹⁰ This quantitative approach proves unsatisfying for Goldsmith, however, as his vast collections of words remain somehow *his*:

I wanted to write a book that I would never be able to know. The approach I took was that of quantity...in the end, the project was a failure. I got to know every word so well...that I am bored by the book. I can't open a page and be surprised. Perhaps quantity was the wrong approach. ("Theory")

⁸⁹ According to my rough calculations, this is very far from true; there might be a light dusting, but hardly a blizzard.

⁹⁰ Goldsmith acknowledges *Day* as an imitation of a 1929 publicity stunt by the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*. In response to complaints that the *Bulletin* published too many advertisements, the paper collected its non-advertisement contents for a single day's issue, June 4, 1928, and published it in book form, under the title *One Day: this volume is designed to show how one copy of the Evening bulletin appears when published in book form*. The 307-page volume underscored the sheer quantity of language a newspaper produces on a daily basis—a lesson commonly attributed to Goldsmith's reboot as well. Cf. Goldsmith, "Theory." *Soliloquy* likewise mimics earlier experiments with printing the recorded voice, such as Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968).

Goldsmith pays the price for his art, becoming too familiar with it in order to make it, so he cannot take up the desired ignorant relation with language. Still, he continues to imagine his audience as finding ways to not-know his work, as well as ways for himself not to know his audience. Whereas the pathos of O'Hara's open-ended apostrophe signals an unusually keen apprehension of the unknown future audience that may await any text, Goldsmith underscores the anonymity of his current audience. "I write books and they are read by people unknown to me. I do a weekly radio show and am heard by 10,000 people at any given time, but it's just me alone in a room" ("Theory"). He actively pursues the modes of ignorance that seem to trouble and preoccupy O'Hara. In this light, Goldsmith's quantitative approach recalls O'Hara's poignant uncertainty, at the end of "Personal Poem," as to whether "one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me." O'Hara answers his own question with a furtive "possibly so," and the resonance of this weak assertion signals the lyric's lingering power to call forth a possible but necessarily unconfirmed social future. Inasmuch as Goldsmith dismisses such investments in the lyric's social powers, we might expect him to respond to the same question with a resounding "no"—i.e., "no one is thinking of me, and I know it"—but he does not. He instead refines the problem of poetry's technological mediation to an anonymous audience. Even knowing that one does have an audience—perhaps even a very large audience—anonymity still textures one's relation to that audience, for one can never really know whom one's voice reaches, nor why they might listen, nor how they might take up an appropriately ignorant relation to one's words.

Whether or not we can coherently ascribe literary value to a book like *Soliloquy*, we must not make the mistake of reading O'Hara in the same way that we read Goldsmith. After all, Goldsmith is the poet who titles one manifesto "Being Boring," and O'Hara is the poet who,

when Edward Lucie-Smith asks about the importance of the modernist injunction to newness, responds, “No, I think it’s very important not to be bored though” (9). Goldsmith’s critique of the everyday and his efforts to defamiliarize boring language help to contextualize critics who approach O’Hara in similar ways—privileging his interest in the trivial, for example, or asserting that he constructs a micro-politics or a social ethics of daily life. Such readings are often quite persuasive, but they should be supplemented with an account of the distinction O’Hara draws between the ordinariness of daily life and the lyrical intensities that his rhetoric of address calls up. As Michael Clune puts it, “for Frank O’Hara’s important early critics, his work’s rigorous orientation toward the trivial, contingent, private details of a particular life presents a unique difficulty,” that of distinguishing the “really poetic lines” that “must be extracted” from the flotsam of advertisements, pop culture, and other trappings of daily life with which they are interspersed (181). Clune makes progress toward a more poised understanding of the ordinary in O’Hara when he argues that “the contingent personal detail” in his work “should be read in relation to the basic unit of O’Hara’s poetic discourse: the personal choice” (182). However, Clune’s attraction to choice as a sign of the personistic casts O’Hara’s version of the *flâneur* as primarily a consumer—always window-shopping, as O’Hara certainly did—whereas the most affecting figure in his poems is that of a *flâneur* in the more directly social sense, a nameless stranger as mysterious to himself as to others. Readers who interpret O’Hara primarily in terms of his quotidian preferences or purchases find the image of their possible trajectories in the trivia-oriented responses to Goldsmith, who actually does bring poetry into alignment with such boring dailiness in productive ways and who leaves aside the properly pathetic lingering with the lyric impulse that O’Hara, by contrast, powerfully sustains. Just as Goldsmith affirmatively engages technologies of the voice in his reworking of soliloquy while O’Hara contrasts his poetic

address with such ordinary tools as telephones and tape recorders, so does Goldsmith's greater openness to a poetry of the boring and the everyday underscore O'Hara's lingering attachments to the social promises of a genre whose complex failings he powerfully explores.

Conclusion. The Lyricism of Queer Ignorance

During the lyric genre's afterlives, weak ignorance has often helped to determine what does or does not count as a lyric poem and, in so doing, has illuminated the lyric's relation to discourses of history and value that continue to shape its significance. To give this account, "Lyric Ignorance" has described several varieties of ignorance, but it has said very little about the active form of this word, to ignore. In fact, the act of ignoring neatly encapsulates the flexible character of weak ignorance that makes it such a powerful resource for thinking about poetry. To ignore something entails awareness of it, combined with a refusal to acknowledge it; one cannot ignore something of which one is oblivious. Like weak ignorance, the act of ignoring negotiates a relation to the same knowledge it disavows. While ignorance generally takes a negative cast, a willingness to ignore the right things (such as distractions or annoyances) can signify mental prudence, even fortitude. In this sense, lyric poems make it possible to ignore—often, to ignore the very issues that lend the lyric genre its identity and, in the era of its afterlives, open it to critique. Primary among these issues are the lyric's historicity and its relation to various discourses of value, whether aesthetic, political, or capital. The strategy of ignoring has done nothing to settle the lyric's value or its historicity, but it has made these questions and their consequences more readily discernable. By virtue of its ambivalent relation to knowledge, such ignoring has supported a range of approaches to the lyric during its afterlives. Whether casting the lyric as lapsed or vital, strategies to ignore have shaped and structured the ongoing afterlife of the genre. In order to summarize this influence and gesture toward future research, this conclusion describes the lyrical habits of ignoring that have emerged from an area "Lyric Ignorance" itself has sometimes ignored, the discourses of gender and sexuality.

The homosexualities of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and Frank O'Hara have shaped their reputations in ways that this project leaves relatively unacknowledged. Ignoring means awareness without acknowledgement, and ignoring the poets' non-normative sexualities has made it possible to discern how a "queer epistemology" exerts its influence far beyond the politics of sexual identities and acts.⁹¹ Still, the rhetoric of lyric ignorance described here owes much of its character to the gay and lesbian histories of its poets. The importance of ignorance for gay and lesbian identities is most apparent in the discourse of the closet. Neither Stein nor O'Hara concealed their homosexuality, but the closet has profoundly shaped Dickinson's reputation because no one knows definitively whether she had sex with women. The rhetoric of ignorance about her has so often referred to her possible lesbianism that within Dickinson's orbit, lesbian identity is structured as an object of ignorance. Not knowing about her sexual orientation has come to function as a kind of lesbian fact; ignorance has become constitutive of Dickinson's lesbianism *per se*. In this sense, her possible lesbianism emerges through the same rhetoric of epistemic loss and recovery that sustains the lyrical intensity of her poems. Readers construct both her lyricism and her lesbianism as objects of ignorance, always verging on inaccessibility and soliciting the very gestures of recovery that frame them as lost objects of knowledge. The impossibility of fully recovering either her lyric expressions or her sexuality rests upon a concept of affective life as necessarily unrecorded—never properly an object of knowledge, but only ever of ignorance.

⁹¹ I borrow the term "queer epistemology," as well as the impulse to draw its ramifications beyond sexual identity politics, from the introduction to a 2005 special issue of *SocialText* edited by David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz. Explaining that "queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent," the authors note that "such an understanding orients queer epistemology...as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics" (3). To queer an episteme, then, might be to think about its supplemental structures of ignorance.

Stein and O'Hara left fuller records of their lives and arguably lived in more tolerant contexts, so they show how queer ignorance supported different evaluative practices as the rigors of the closet eased. In Stein's own time, her writing and demeanor seemed so strange that her relationship with Alice Toklas appeared ironically to be one of the more legible aspects of her personality, yet the frank domesticity of Stein's lesbianism and her perceived masculine dominance of Toklas has occasioned consternation in recent discussions.⁹² She at times seems like the wrong kind of lesbian for her avant-gardism to appear as a dispensation of queer life—too willing to appropriate heteronormative gender roles and divisions of labor. Such negative evaluations indicate the ambivalence of judgments about ignorance, the need to avoid viewing ignorance as a purely negative or privative condition. Queer lives such as Stein's, lived affirmatively and publicly, remain subject to an array of negative judgments, and the closet itself can have its erotic pleasures and political advantages. Meanwhile, O'Hara's poems poignantly express social detachment and anonymity, but there is no good reason to attribute these moods to his homosexuality. O'Hara may have been among relatively few men in mid-century America to find a milieu in which to be comfortably, openly gay, and this was possible thanks in part to the anonymity and intimate social distances of the urban spaces his poems describe. Discourses of homosexual identity have produced a rhetoric of ignorance that makes it possible to understand O'Hara's ideas about anonymity and self-doubt, but his theory of the social cannot be linked solely to his personal experience of homosexuality. From the most quotidian experiences of closeting and outing to the most formal work in queer theory, the discourses of non-normative sexuality have produced a remarkably nuanced language of ignorance. This language crucially

⁹² Cf. Cope and Stimpson.

enables the poets discussed in “Lyric Ignorance,” and without it the importance of ignorance for the afterlives of the lyric would be less available to critical attention.

The language of queer ignorance challenges conventional methods of historical interpretation and highlights the productivity of ignoring history. So much of any life goes unrecorded, but queer scholarship has analyzed how disciplines of knowledge (legal, religious, biological) limit accounts of homosocial or homosexual contact. Theorists of queer historiography have thus developed a conceptual vocabulary for the kinds of loss and concealment that police gay histories and for the techniques of recovery that might make them visible.⁹³ The image of social history in “Lyric Ignorance” draws upon such vocabularies: the first chapter, on Dickinson, explores the evanescence of affective experience, its tendency to go unrecorded despite texturing life so profoundly; the second, on Stein and Mac Low, references the erotic “chance encounter” and the historiological challenge of contingency; and the third, on O’Hara, echoes queer theories of cruising and anonymous contact that trouble the impulse to name and know those who socialize. In such cases, queer ways of ignoring do not simply imagine gay and lesbian history as needing recovery but, more importantly, explore how aspects of social life most likely to go unrecorded can sometimes make the most historical difference. This insight about the historical importance of ignorance makes it possible to celebrate strategies of non-assertion and recessive action as alternatives to the demand for historical visibility. If an ignored history has political powers, these might stem from its status as ignored rather than its anticipated destiny as an object of historical knowledge. The idea of an ignored history recalls

⁹³ Notable studies in this area include Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2009); Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007); and Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (2001).

Anne-Lise François's discussion of tree-spiking, the environmentalist "practice of driving ceramic nails into old-growth trees so that they would, if logged, damage logging machinery" (*Open* 36-37). A press release warns that some trees have been spiked, and the spikes deter loggers because they cannot be detected in advance. If ever a spike reveals itself by damaging a machine, it does so too late. The tree has already been cut down. The spike loses its ability to deter in the process of becoming visible. Like a tree spike, an ignored history's power may lie in its nondiscovery.

Through these strategies, some models of queer history have come to seem "out of time" in the same dual sense that shapes the lyric's historicity during the period of its afterlives. As post-Language experimental writing extends its anti-expressivist project, the lyric runs out of time in an historical sense. It appears increasingly belated, never fully present as a living genre but only as lapsed, soliciting recovery. The pathos of its decline recalls the sense of historical privation described in the most influential accounts of queer negativity.⁹⁴ Yet the lyric also appears "out of time" in the sense that it gestures beyond historical context, striving toward a temporal suspension by which it transcends its historical contexts. In the same way, a queer sense of history might take a step "out of time" by evading the coercive narratives of social development and temporal ordering that govern heteronormative histories. In the period of its afterlives, the lyric often troubles commonplaces of historical interpretation through a rhetoric that ignores history. Much of this rhetoric emerges from gay and lesbian criticism that negotiates various strategies of disavowal and erasure in order to recover a queer sense of history—often by appropriating the very language of ignorance that had policed the historical record of non-normative sexuality.

⁹⁴ Cf. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) and Lee Edelman, *No Future* (2004).

“Lyric Ignorance” has unpacked how these strategies for productively ignoring history enable lyrical writing to challenge historicist criticism. The lyric often stands as a privileged exemplar among literary genres—indeed, often signifies the height of literary refinement. Because of its exemplarity, the lyric has served as a test case for historicist attacks upon the study of literary genres. Some critics argue that the lyric as a category effaces the historical variability of texts that have fallen under its purview and of the minor poetic genres it overshadows.⁹⁵ They imply that any strong theory of genres aspires to ahistorical universalism, and inasmuch as any generic concept must necessarily cut across historical variations, these historicist accounts are persuasive. This study, by contrast, has explored how the lyric genre in turn troubles some precepts of historicist criticism—how it ignores but does not simply elide history. Emily Dickinson’s lyricizing readers ignore history through a dual motion: they approach her manuscripts as traces of an archaic self-expression, and they use new media to render such inscriptions visible at a distance, taking this distance as a sign of the poems’ lyrical pathos. Similarly, Jackson Mac Low’s chance-operational rewritings of Gertrude Stein sharpen the difficulty that contingency poses for historical interpretation, and they show that such randomness can sustain lyric expression rather than dampening it in the expected ways. Finally, Frank O’Hara’s techniques of lyric address reflect on the anonymous, estranged social encounters that shape our lives while often going unrecorded, yet the lonesomeness of his poems counsels against reading them as historical records of his social life. In each case, the lyric’s productive ways of ignoring history test the limits and contest the assumptions of historicist interpretation. Such strategies of historical ignorance owe much to the gay and lesbian histories

⁹⁵ See contributions by Virginia Jackson, Rei Terada, and Yopie Prins to the “The New Lyric Studies” section of *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008), as well as Virginia Jackson’s book, *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005).

from which these poets emerge, but studying the lyric indicates how broad an influence these strategies now have.

The sweeping technological changes of the past half-century and more have supported such poetic strategies of ignoring while sometimes making these strategies harder to discern. New media have made it trivially easy to copy and manipulate preexistent text, images, or audio—techniques that Janet Holmes, Michael Magee, Jackson Mac Low, and Kenneth Goldsmith all utilize. These practices have disrupted the privilege of personal expression and individualism normally associated with poetic authorship. The computer's transformative power is often affiliated with its informatic function, its ability to gather, sort, and represent data. This study supplements such accounts by analyzing how computers make it possible to ignore and conceal. A computer's estranging, technological function can guide unconcealment and provide ontological insight, but its more common use as quotidian equipment, as a simple means to an end, often sustains the aesthetic, political, and erotic pleasures of veiling, dissimulating, and ignoring. New media, in other words, have become quite easy to ignore, making it difficult to see exactly how they condition knowledge. Although the techniques described in "Lyric Ignorance" are clearly shaped by technological history, it is impossible to judge how different the afterlives of the lyric might be if technologies for reading and writing had developed differently. Even while acknowledging the influence of technological history, the effort to understand ignorance may require ignoring the extent to which a given text is materially determined by the devices of its production.

The queer strategy of ignoring has likewise reshaped the discourses of value by which a poem is conventionally assessed. In response to disciplinary practices of closeting and outing, writers who affirm queer identity often reconsider the value of visibility, where this means both

socio-political legibility and ontological unconcealment. Feminist and queer theorists have long recognized that the privilege and coherence of straight male identities relies upon the treatment of women and sexual minorities as ignorant and as objects of ignorance. More recent work has also argued that the articulation of value often draws upon similar rhetorics of ignorance—for instance, in the account of risk in finance or epidemiology. The imperative to become available for evaluation often exposes queer subjects to further violence and marginalization. Strategies of concealment and dissimulation, meanwhile, can have their advantages and, indeed, their pleasures. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick describes these non-critical strategies as forms of “reparative reading” (123-151). Similar impulses have motivated a range of scholarly projects that resist the reduction of analytic methods to a choice between ideology-critique and canon-formation. Such work questions whether literary and cultural scholarship must aim to produce critical knowledge, points out that the rendition of certain people and cultural products as objects of knowledge can amount to epistemic coercion, and argues that the uncritical nature of the art object actually invites the strategies to ignore that have emerged from discourses of non-normative sexuality.⁹⁶ These questions and assertions disrupt the theories of value sustained by more “paranoid” critical protocols and underscore the positive pleasures of ignorance and ignoring, pleasures with which poets are familiar. As William Carlos Williams writes, “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” Even if a poem offers no information about the world, it can provide fulfillment precisely by turning away from the local news. Especially in literary contexts, where a poem might occasion uncertainty or doubt rather than clarity and conviction, the language of strategic concealment makes it possible to explore alternatives to a language of value based on aesthetic

⁹⁶ On the ethics of not-knowing and its sometimes violent effects, see Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007) and Jane McConkey, “Knowledge and Acknowledgement: ‘Epistemic Injustice’ as a Problem of Recognition,” *Politics* 24.3 (2004): 198-205.

or political critique. The queer pleasures of deciding not to know provide a highly enabling vocabulary for the claims against knowledge that poets and their readers so often make.

Hence, the analysis of lyric ignorance disrupts conventional ways of assigning value to literature and to scholarship. The rhetoric of ignorance often coordinates a poem's relation to the lyric genre, and such generic attributions function as a discourse of value. Because genres organize literary works in a trans-historical typology, a work's assignment to a genre can secure it against historical contingencies of value. Meanwhile, an array of value-claims about poetry make direct reference to knowledge or ignorance. These claims, however, operate in highly ambivalent ways. Where poetry appears distinct from knowledge, this distinctness can offer a reason to praise *or* to deride poetry; and where poetry is allied with knowledge, this allegiance can provide reasons to praise it as source of gnostic insight *or* to deride it as a handmaiden to the sciences. The knowledge/ignorance distinction organizes a series of other commitments that combine and recombine to signify a lyric poem's value: these include its timelessness or ahistoricity, its expressiveness or individualism, its engagement with the material or aural substance of language, and its formal autonomy or wholeness. Scholars have examined each of these typically lyrical traits and more, but the analysis of the lyric's relation to ignorance coordinates them within a broader, ongoing debate about the value of poetry.

The account of lyric ignorance also focuses and extends current discussions about the value of humanities scholarship as a practice of knowledge-production, and there is much space for further research in this area. Because the rhetoric of fact and certainty is more familiar and maintains a steadier relation to its objects than that of ignorance, this study hazards an overly capacious definition of ignorance and a too narrow definition of rational knowledge. It does so in order to ignore momentarily the habitual subordination of ignorance as knowledge's unhappy

other—to take seriously the rewards of claiming not to know. Claims against knowledge make it possible to question the imperative to critique and open reparative criticism as an alternative method. Without decisively advocating uncritical thought as an escape from rationalist discipline, it is possible to examine how the rhetoric of ignorance sets the skeptical injunction at arm's length, offering perspective on the socio-political and aesthetic stakes of the impulse to know. To explore the value of claims against knowledge is also to demand an account of why knowledge should itself be valued—and of the contexts in which it should not. By the same token, this exploration raises the more challenging question of when a valorization of ignorance should be accepted and when rejected. Just as rationalism sometimes functions as discipline, so too do some appeals to ignorance warrant rejection rather than celebration.⁹⁷ “Lyric Ignorance” provides no means of adjudicating good and bad appeals to ignorance; it only begins to describe how such appeals have shaped poetry cultures. The descriptive aim to take the language of ignorance seriously instead of ignoring it does not, however, set methods of rationalist critique out of bounds. Quite the contrary, this study works between critique and poetics; it describes how the rhetoric of ignorance provides conditions of possibility in both aesthetic and epistemic senses, shaping both what counts as a poem and what emerges as knowledge. Part of the difficulty of theorizing weak ignorance has been to insist upon its ambivalence in relation to knowledge, its readiness to produce ignorance in equal measure to insight. I hope “Lyric Ignorance” has produced both knowledge about the afterlives of the lyric and a good measure of the weak, tractable ignorance that can guide further inquiry.

⁹⁷ In addition to the citing of women and sexual minorities as subjects and objects of ignorance, the nativist imputation of irrationality to minorities or indigenous groups may be well-intentioned, but it often serves to exclude such groups from the political process and from reasoned debate. Cf. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997) and Shannon Sullivan, ed., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007).

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